From military to civilian life: Challenges and resources in the transition of former child soldiers in northern Uganda

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Cover photograph: taken by the author. The people on this picture are incidental bystanders, not formerly recruited children who participated in this research.

Banksy | 2011

Preface

These first and, at the same time, last pages of my dissertation somehow feel like the hardest to write; a journey has come to an end, a tale has been told. The research plan of this doctoral dissertation has been finalized, and yet it feels that such research is difficult to bring to a close at a certain point. There is still so much left unexplored, topics that I touched upon but could not yet delve into during this research. The cases of former child soldiers and other people in situations of armed conflict got under my skin and this concern will not disappear after the completion of this doctoral research. On the contrary, this research has aroused my genuine interest and strengthened my motivation to further dedicate my professional life to this cause. Many times I was asked why I was doing what I am doing, and that question has always puzzled me. The best explanation I have been able to come up with so far, following episodes of deep reflection, reaches nearly as far back in my life as I can remember, since I have always been fascinated by the diversity of cultures, many of which had something mysterious that attracted me. Moreover, the deep impression left on me by the huge discrepancies I observed between people's lives has heightened my awareness that neither blessings nor resources are distributed equally in the world. I tend to concur with the idea that every person is allocated to a random place in this world at birth, where the development of the potentials she entered the world with is facilitated or inhibited[1]. I believe that reasons and explanations for what we do are to be found in the interaction between our own characteristics and those of our environment, and especially in how we perceive, live in and interact with that environment[2]. Over time, I discovered and explored the possibilities of the freedom and opportunities I was granted to transcend the boundaries of the place I was born in and to redirect myself to where my heart goes out. That is probably part of the explanation of how I ended up writing this dissertation about the transition of formerly recruited young people in northern Uganda.

Over the last four years, living in my native Belgium and travelling back and forth for some prolonged stays in Uganda has formed the context within which this research was conceived and has gradually unfolded. It has been a

[1] Boothby, N., Strang, A., & Wessells, M. (2006). *A world turned upside down. Social ecological approaches to children in war zones*. Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press.

[2] Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Hobfoll, S.E. (2002). Social and psychological resources and adaptation. *Review of General Psychology, 6*(4), 307-324.

fascinating time, commuting between these two countries, two cultures, two worlds of significations. It augmented my inner urge to travel[3] to an unprecedented level, to continuously discover more of both worlds and enrich myself with the invaluable experiences and thoughts that I gained by this exchange. With each visit, the first steps on Ugandan soil felt increasingly familiar and the immediate and intense stimulation of my senses by the first impressions of the vibrant streets, the sounds of energetic Ugandan songs, the smell of roasted maize on charcoal, and the laughter of lively gesticulating people always filled me with a warm feeling of coming home. And yet, every time again, my impression of Uganda was different. Over the years that I have worked there, and especially en route to the north of the country, I noticed how the emergent but indecisive belief in a state of peace gradually made people feel more secure in leaving the protected zones, dismantling the displaced persons camps, starting to construct their houses and cultivate their land. These subtle changes in the landscape appeared so clearly to me, they made me aware not only of the continuous changes in this area, but also of my own changing frame of reference and perception. Each encounter was an altered way of being in this world that was itself also altered. It is beyond doubt that by virtue of such encounters and the time I spent in Uganda, changes also took place in the way I lived and in how I saw the world I was so familiar with, often filling me with a sense of alienation when back in Belgium. The periods of residence in Uganda made me return from my journey with a suitcase full of life-enhancing experiences and thoughts that moulded my perceptions and responses to what I encountered.

In his essay *Kriegslandschaft*[4] Kurt Lewin brilliantly narrates his experience with the landscape of World War I and recounts the changing perceived reality of this landscape as he moves nearer to the front of the battlefield. He meticulously describes the altering viewpoints from which the landscape of war is experienced and conceived in his perception. In his view, the signification of the objective characteristics of the landscape depends upon the position from which the landscape is experienced and described by him. He thereby distinguishes between the different roles one fulfils in the landscape of war and delineates how a change in the position relative to the battlefield may engender a transformed perception. Lewin's essay conveys the idea that these positions and related viewpoints influence the way objective characteristics of the landscape become meaningful to people and thus lead to different experiences. I, too, had changing perspectives on the northern Ugandan landscape, depending on my position relative to the

[3] de Botton, A. (2003). *The art of travel*. London: Hamish Hamilton.
[4] Lewin, K. (1917). Krieglandschaft. *Zeitschrift Angewandter Psychologie, 12*, 440-447.

front. I also realized that my position as a *muno*[5] and my experience as an outsider with the landscape of northern Uganda were quite different from that of an insider who had lived experiences of warfare. For that reason, I mostly let myself be led through this landscape by my Ugandan companions. Whether this landscape was viewed as a conflict zone or as a post-conflict zone depended greatly on their personal perceptions. Some of my companions decided to show me the overstretched displaced persons camps, the scars left by bullets on their body or the massacre memorial markers, while others told me vividly about this pearl of Africa, about the new buildings being erected, or their heroic stories of how they had managed to escape the rebels. These diverse experiences and perspectives often shook, confirmed or redirected but undoubtedly steered my course across this landscape and my journey through this research.

At the outset of this research and during my first encounter with northern Uganda in 2008, I was overwhelmed by the confrontation with the true horrors of war, the deep and painful marks it had left in the landscape and in the life of nearly every person who crossed my path. Coming to realize that human beings are capable of inflicting such inhuman cruelty on others defied my understanding. The suffered harm and endured hardship I discovered there often fell beyond all words, stretching my own boundaries as a researcher. Equally compelling were the innumerable exchanges with young people who exhaled inherent strength and inexhaustible courage amidst the adversities and challenges that permeated their lives. These glimpses of their resilience in the face of considerable hardship and distress encouraged me to adopt a strengths perspective[6] and to focus on the efforts that these people and their surroundings undertake to withstand or recover from the harm inflicted on them. These marked evolutions in the positions and lenses through which I perceived and assigned meaning to the reality of northern Uganda are expressed throughout this dissertation and are noticeable in the description of the landscape of war/peace and in the portrayals of the young victims/survivors. This research on the challenges and resources in the transition of former child soldiers from the military to civilian life has been a process of continuous exercise in striking a balance between, on the one hand, acknowledging and highlighting the harm that was inflicted on them and that often resulted in formidable distress and needs, and on the other, emphasizing the incredible strengths and incessant

[5] White person

[6] Hobfoll, S.E. (2002). Social and psychological resources and adaptation. *Review of General Psychology, 6*(4), 307-324.
Saleeby, D. (1997). *The strengths perspective in social work practice. 2nd Edition*. New York: Longman.

courage of these people that nurtured resilient responses to these aversive circumstances. Over the course of this research, I realized that such a balancing act is imperative, as the lives of the many young people I met and shared with are seldom characterized by the one or the other aspect. Most often their position is somewhere in the middle of encountering challenges and finding resources, a position that is in itself influenced by myriad features of a complex reality, that are perceived and assigned meaning to depending on one's position and viewpoint.

Despite these developments and turns in the research process, a core thread running through this dissertation has been the eagerness to discover empirically how situations are perceived by the people who participate in and assign meaning to them. Pedagogical research and the recurrent consecutive acts of questioning, analyzing and theorizing implied that I immersed myself in the praxis under study[7]. Without detaching myself from my cultural and scientific theoretical background, I sought to elicit and capture the perspectives of formerly recruited young people. The challenge then was to use this dissertation as a medium to convey their perceptions of the reality and the meanings they assigned to their lived experiences. So rather than revealing the ultimately true and all-encompassing knowledge about former child soldiers' transition in the aftermath of child soldiering, I hope that this dissertation unveils the complexity of the reality and the situations former child soldiers may find themselves in. This dissertation can be read as an account not only of the research findings but equally of the personal research process. I hope this account may be as inspiring for you as the journey towards it has been for me.

[7] Van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience. Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. New York: State University of New York Press.

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On my journey, I had many companions who crossed my path, shared with me, guided and inspired me; some in very visible ways, others rather subtly, but always significantly. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all these companions for an infinite multiplicity of reasons. Thank you! *Apwoyo matek*!

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love & peace,

Sofie
November 2012

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1

General Introduction*

* Based on Vindevogel, S., Broekaert, E., & Derluyn, I. (accepted). Child soldiers. In J. Conte (Ed.), *Child Abuse & Neglect Worldwide*. Westport CT: Praeger Publishers.

"We must not close our eyes to the fact that child soldiers are both victims and perpetrators. They sometimes carry out the most barbaric acts of violence. But no matter what the child is guilty of, the main responsibility lies with us, the adults. There is simply no excuse, no acceptable argument for arming children."

Desmond M. Tutu

Abstract

In this general introduction, child soldiering is conceptualized from a global perspective, with attention for the paradigmatic developments that contributed to its problematization and criminalization over time. Child soldiering is moreover situated in a broader societal context and its possible root causes are discussed. The experiences that are typically associated with child soldiering practices throughout the world are highlighted, and it is illustrated that such experiences may affect the physical, psychological, social, educational, economic and political domains of life, thereby creating situations of complex emergency. This urges for psychosocial responses that acknowledge the complexity of the situation former child soldiers find themselves in upon departure from the armed faction. The historically predominant biomedical model and the recent critiques on its narrow trauma-focused, individualistic, universalizing and pathologizing approach are discussed. It is then explained how this has led to the problem statement, research questions and aims of this study. Since this research draws on social ecological systems theory and resource-based theory, the theoretical tenets and the specific terminology of these frameworks are presented. Finally, the research design and the methodology of the four studies are described.

1.1 Child soldiering: a global phenomenon

1.1.1 Conceptualization of child soldiering

The involvement of young people in armed forces and armed groups has been a practice of all times and places, as seen for instance in the harsh *agoge* of Spartan children some centuries BC, the training of young Aztec warriors around the 15th century, the military involvement of medieval squires in Europe, and the recruitment of cadets throughout modern civil wars around the globe (Honwana, 2006; Rosen, 2005). Contemporarily, the involvement of children in war might be even more widespread due to a range of recent evolutions in the nature of warfare, whereby civilians – among whom children[1] are considered particularly vulnerable – are increasingly caught in the midst of the battlefield and directly targeted via a range of deliberate strategies, like the recruitment of young people by armed groups and armed forces (Anwo, Rembe, & Odeku, 2009; Beneduce, Jourdan, Raeymaekers, & Vlassenroot, 2006; Goodhand & Hulme, 1999; Kaldor, 1999; Machel, 1996; Vargas, 2009; Wessells, 2006b; Williams, 2007).

For a variety of reasons, presenting exact facts on the prevalence of child soldiering is complicated. Veiled and constantly fluid patterns of entry and return of fighting forces, precarious birth registration practices, undocumented births, disappearances, returns and deaths in the concerned countries, procedural measurement and statistical sampling challenges, conceptual discussions on childhood and fighting forces, and objections towards singling out formerly recruited youth all confound the presentation of exact figures on this elusive population (Pedersen & Sommerfelt, 2007; Wessells, 2006b). Therefore, such data should always be considered provisional and approximate. Obtaining more precise figures on the prevalence of child soldiering would allow for accurate documentation of the seriousness and widespread nature of such child abuse, increase early observation of the characteristics of child soldiers[2] and their recruiters,

[1] The term '*children*' is throughout this dissertation used to describe young people under 18 years of age, as defined under international law including the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. This is, however, an arbitrary conceptualization since there is no universal conceptualisation of childhood (Boyden, 1997).

[2] The term '*child soldiers*' is throughout this dissertation used to refer to all people under 18 years of age who are recruited by or associated with armed forces or groups and who serve in any role, including as non-combatants. This term is preferred over 'children associated with armed forces or armed groups' as suggested in the Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children

work to substantiate this underreported crime, and enhance the capacity to track the evolutions of such practices. According to the latest global report on child soldiering, it is estimated that roughly a quarter of a million children are currently conscripted and militarily used in armed conflicts worldwide (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2008). The vastness of child soldiering is evident in its widespread existence throughout the world. Globally, child soldiering is applied by both state and non-state actors in a variety of armed conflicts, nearly half of which are waging on the African continent (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2008). While efforts persuading armed groups and forces to stop recruiting and start releasing children have contributed to a decrease in prevalence, recent hotbeds of conflict still lead uprising fighting forces to begin recruiting young people (United Nations General Assembly Security Council, 2011).

The term 'child soldiers' commonly evokes images of reckless young boys, dressed in bullet straps and carrying an AK-47 in the frontline of firefights (Honwana, 2006). Such an image, however, does not capture the complex and diverse ways in which young people are involved in fighting forces. While some do fulfil such a combating role, there are likely many more who are behind the scene taking up rather invisible, supportive roles such as that of cook (Boothby & Knudsen, 2000; Machel, 2001). Moreover, the population of recruited young people does not solely consist of boys, but covers a considerable amount of girls who often participate in these military activities but also tend to be gender-specifically exploited for instance as sexslaves (McKay & Mazurana, 2004; Vindevogel, Coppens, Derluyn, De Schryver, Loots, & Broekaert, 2011). Generally, the position that child soldiers hold is highly contextual, dependent on child, group and conflict characteristics, and their roles are diverse and transform throughout their time spent with the fighting force (Wessells, 2006b). More concretely, child soldiers' roles and experiences may vary greatly according to the children's age, gender, loyalty to the group and its cause, skills and time with the fighting force; the group's membership, resources and internal codes of conduct; and the combat's intensity and operational area (Human Rights Watch, 2004; Vindevogel et al., 2011; Wessells, 2006b).

The most comprehensive and internationally endorsed definition of child soldiers, acknowledging this diversity, was established in the Cape Town Principles and refers to "*any person under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers, and those accompanying such groups,*

Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups (2007), because the latter term is unwieldy and in itself problematic (Wessells, 2006b).

other than purely as family members. Girls recruited for sexual purposes and forced marriage are included in this definition. It does not, therefore, only refer to a child who is carrying or has carried arms" (Unicef, 1997, p. 14).

1.1.2 Problematization and criminalization of child soldiering

The term 'child soldiers' often defies emotional and moral senses. This may be due to conflicting associations with the terms 'childhood' and 'warfare'. 'Childhood' is often associated with vulnerability and innocence, while 'warfare' is generally associated with violence, discord and a loss of innocence. This conceptual juxtaposition is typically disconcerting (Honwana, 2006; Lee, 2009; Rosen, 2005). Yet, this is a relatively recent development, as evidenced by the long, unchallenged history of child soldiering, showing that military training of young people is probably as old as warfare itself and has long been a supreme norm in many societies. The once dominant perception of the morality and legitimacy of child soldiering has been significantly altered over the past centuries as a result of evolving pedagogical, social and political discourses (Lee, 2009). In the global West, images evolved from indifference for childhood as a distinct life-period; over childhood as a distinguished social, educational and cultural moratorium entitled to safe development, particular care and protection; to childhood as a life-period of evolving competence and agency. This development engendered equal human rights that allow children's autonomy and social participation, as well as supplementary child rights that cover children's vulnerability in light of their evolving capacities and that protect them against violations by unconscionable adults (Dasberg, 1984; De Winter, 1994; Hanson, 2011; Hofferth & Owens, 2001; Verhellen, 2000). Generally, children became viewed as rights bearing subjects rather than objects, which engendered a range of children's rights-based legal and policy developments, culminating in the UN International Convention on the Rights of the Child (ICRC, 1989) that incorporates the right to provision, protection and participation (Dasberg, 1984; Dekker, 2009; United Nations General Assembly, 1989; Verhellen, 2000).

This paradigmatic shift fostered a growing awareness and subsequent problematization of child soldiering, conceptualizing it in terms of grave children's rights violation and placing it as a prominent issue on the humanitarian and human rights agenda. This incited a range of international conventions enshrining the rights that children hold in armed conflict and outlining measures conducive to the protection of these rights (Hanson, 2011; Lee, 2009). These include the Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions (1977), the Cape Town Principles and Best Practices on the

Prevention of Recruitment of Children into the Armed Forces and on Demobilization and Social Reintegration of Child Soldiers in Africa (1997), the International Labour Organization Convention 182 (1998), the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1999), the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict to the ICRC (2000), and the Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups (2007) (Rosen, 2007). Additionally, the UN Security Council has passed a series of resolutions on children in armed conflict. As part of this effort, the UN has established a special working group and representative dedicated to promoting and protecting the rights of all children affected by armed conflict, and to lobbying specifically for the eradication of child recruitment (United Nations General Assembly, 1997). All these initiatives have contributed to the development of an international legal and political framework prohibiting and condemning child soldiering. This framework addresses legal issues of child recruitment and deployment by armed factions, disarmament and demobilization, physical and psychological rehabilitation and social reintegration of formerly recruited young people, and monitoring of child soldiering practices (Hanson, 2011).

From a legal perspective, child soldiering became subjected to international criminal law, implying the conceptualization of child recruitment as a war-crime and creating the possibility to hold culpable, prosecute and indict child recruiters through a range of international, hybrid and national jurisdictions (Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, 2011). A seminal milestone in this development was the adoption of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (1998), which resulted in the establishment of the first and only permanent international court (2006) designed to prosecute perpetrators of war crimes and pursuit legal justice complementary to national criminal courts that are unable or unwilling to investigate and prosecute these crimes (United Nations, 1999). To strengthen this national level, there are also internationalized domestic jurisdictions like the special courts (e.g., for Sierra Leone, Lebanon), initiated to address regional conflicts and grave violations by fighting forces on this territory (Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, 2011). Since justice encompasses far more than solely penalizing perpetrators, non-judicial procedures such as Truth and Reconciliation Commissions and local transitional justice mechanisms also fulfill an important role in meeting the needs for acknowledgment and reparation of suffering as well as for holding accountable and promoting reconciliation in the aftermath of war at large and child soldiering in specific (No Peace

without Justice, 2010; Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, 2011).

1.1.3 Child soldiering in its broader societal context

While the legal framework addressing child soldiering is firmly established, the proliferation of the concerned laws and treaties led to a range of inconsistencies regarding the minimum age for child military enlistment and use (15 versus 18 years), voluntary enrolment into an armed group or force (allowed versus prohibited), the nature of the parties' obligation (intents versus results), the actors that can be held accountable following ratification (state and/or non-state), and the role of children participating in armed conflict (victim versus agent) (Hanson, 2011). Complicating conceptualizations of child soldiering further, the enclosed humanitarian imperatives tend to emphasize the image that child soldiers are incapable victims of adults' abusive compulsion and own no legal agency and accountability, which does not fully agree with prevailing pedagogical and jurisprudential discourses, nor does it represent all child soldiers' perceptions of their role (Brett, 2003; Lee, 2009; Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, 2011; Utas, 2005). These observations arise from the challenge of capturing the complexity of the global child soldiering practice and of covering the diversity of underlying socio-cultural norms and practices concerning childhood and soldiering (Kimmel & Roby, 2007; Rosen, 2007).

Young people enter armed factions in a variety of ways and on grounds of aggregated motives of their recruiters and/or their social networks and/or themselves, covering the continuum between choice and coercion. Many armed groups prefer children to fill their ranks, due to a set of advantages ascribed to juvenile soldiers or lack of adult support towards the group, and therefore apply forced recruitment methods such as abduction, violence or threat (Somasundaram, 2002). Not seldom, families and broader social networks encourage their children to join the military. This may occur for a variety of reasons including ideological conviction, social pressure or despair regarding the harsh child-rearing environment (Honwana, 2006; Kimmel & Roby, 2007; Wessells, 2006b). While a vast amount of children enrol in armed groups and forces setting their own pace without such clear external compulsion, they often have scant alternatives to escape and survive the profound toll that armed conflict takes on their society and lives (Boothby & Knudsen, 2000; Brett & Specht, 2004; Machel, 2001; Maclure & Denov, 2006; Shakya, 2011; Somasundaram, 2002). Lastly, there are also children who declare to have explicitly chosen for military life out of

ideological commitment (Barenbaum, Ruchkin, & Schwab-Stone, 2004; Human Rights Watch, 2003; Punamaki, Qouta, & El-Sarraj, 2001). Overall, a multiplicity of compelling push and pull-factors, respectively referring to negatives that are avoided (e.g., poverty) and positives that are gained (e.g., status) by joining a fighting force, drive many young people into the military (Boothby & Knudsen, 2000; Brett & Specht, 2004; Hoiskar, 2001; Machel, 2001; Somasundaram, 2002; Wessells, 2006b).

The patterns of entering fighting forces thus reveal multiple and complex motives, that form expressions of more profound root causes of child soldiering (Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, 2008; Somasundaram, 2002). When analyzing these root causes that motivate and sustain child soldiering, it becomes apparent that societies often form the breeding ground for the influx of children in armed groups and forces. The society's role herein ranges from a failure to protect children against harm and exploitation, over the denial of opportunities and valuable alternatives for young people in the society, to the active promotion of power asymmetry and engagement in discrimination of young generations, and the normalization of violence as a means to obtain the valued objectives and execute control over life (McCallin, 1995; Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, 2008; Somasundaram, 2002; Wessells, 2006b). While the armed groups and forces recruiting young people are particularly culpable of this child exploitation, the societal context wherein this can take place indubitably accounts for making young people extremely vulnerable for recruitment into fighting forces, and is prone to cycles of violence and abuse towards children (Somasundaram, 2002). Child soldiering should therefore be considered as part of a broader, more complex problem of child abuse and neglect in societies, whereby understanding the wider context of child abuse is a prerequisite for understanding the occurrence of child soldiering (McCallin, 1995; Somasundaram, 2002).

As with many harmful practices towards children, the influence of Western evolving discourses condemned child soldiering as an unlawful form of child abuse and subjected it to an international normative framework. This framework, albeit often proposed as universal, in fact rather is a dominantly Western-based construct that does not necessarily represent the views and values of all peoples in all contexts (Lee, 2009). In many societies, for instance, other indicators than the age-barrier (e.g., sexual activity, economic independency, rites of passage, ...) are drawn on to conceptualize and demarcate childhood, making young people often considered as mature and therefore eligible for military life long before they reach the age of

eighteen (Honwana, 2006; Rosen, 2007). When disregarding such cross-cultural variations related to the diversity of local understandings and indigenous frameworks concerning child soldiering, international legal frameworks - when presented and imposed as universal - may be perceived as alienating and therefore fail to create local resonance that engenders the very much needed profound and sustainable social change process concerning child abuse and neglect at large and child soldiering in specific (Mackie & LeJeune, 2009). This might explain why, despite countless global efforts to eradicate child soldiering, it is still a widespread practice. Hence, a more contextualized approach, preoccupied with unpacking and understanding the nuanced and complex reality of young people's entry into fighting forces as well as the local views on the motives to persist or to abandon practices of child soldiering, is the entry point for finding appropriate and effective transformative strategies to eradicate this child abuse (Mackie & LeJeune, 2009; Rosen, 2007). Such approaches to child soldiering do not only consist of an international, top-down imposed legal strategy, but also encompass a bottom-up, systemic approach of the propelling push- and pull- factors and underlying root causes drawing children into the ranks of armed groups and armed factions. Only when thoroughly understanding and addressing people's motives for child soldiering, strategies preventing the exploitation of children as soldiers can be effective and sustainable.

One compelling argument for the transformation of child soldiering practices is the detrimental impact that it might have on young people, for there is a general human propensity to want what is best for the young generation, be it to foster individual well-being or to serve the larger social welfare (Mackie & LeJeune, 2009). Protecting young people from harm and thereby promoting their well-being might therefore be a motivation that is binding nations worldwide and is creating universal consensus on this issue. A ground-breaking role in drawing attention to the impact of warfare on children was fulfilled by a United Nations' study of Graça Machel (1996), not only because it was one of the first initiatives shedding light on child soldiering practices, but also because it was unprecedented in eliciting political interest in war's impact on the well-being of children (Derluyn & Broekaert, 2010; Rosen, 2005). This report further instigated the scientific field to study the complex and persuasive ways in which child soldiering affects the lives of young people (formerly) recruited by armed forces and groups.

1.2 Child soldiering experiences

While all children in situations of armed conflict are likely to be exposed to and affected by warfare, those who become part of a belligerent faction are more intensively and directly involved in the conflict, and are therefore found to endure an increased amount of war-related adversities (Amone-P'Olak, 2007; Annan, Blattman, & Horton, 2006; Human Rights Watch, 1994). Although the context and circumstances of child soldiering undoubtedly lead to regional differences, research efforts to unveil and understand what child soldiers live through have shown some cross-cutting mechanisms and experiences in armed groups and forces. The findings of this research are outlined below, showing that child soldiering involves a multitude of hardships for recruited young people, resulting from the associated child abuse and war violence.

Young people who enter armed groups are often abruptly uprooted from their habitat, separated from their caretakers and other support figures, and subjugated by the harsh rules and practices of a militarized environment (Human Rights Watch, 2003; Vindevogel et al., 2011). In most cases, they are not allowed to maintain relationships with the home front, and relatives or friends are not always allowed to remain together while in the group (Human Rights Watch, 2003; Wessells, 2006b). They typically undergo a ruthless military training, whereby they are taught how to handle a weapon, to organize attacks such as laying ambushes, looting residential areas and trading centres, and to perpetrate atrocities such as abducting, raping, maiming and killing civilians. The aim of this training is to practically prepare new recruits for combat against the opponents, while simultaneously drilling them psychologically and installing obedience and control, through inducing fear and demanding compliance to commands (Denov, 2010; Mulanda, 2009; Vindevogel et al., 2011). Some armed groups and forces use rites of initiation to symbolize this transition from civilian to military life, such as assigning a combat name that signifies the child's particular characteristic or role in the fight (Human Rights Watch, 2003, 2004).

The living conditions within armed groups and forces are mostly precarious and life-threatening. Often residing in remote regions and seeking refuge in bushy areas, fighting forces are confronted with a scarcity of resources like food and water, hygienic supplies and medical care (Derluyn et al., 2004; Human Rights Watch, 2003). Children are typically commanded to loot these basic requirements from civilians, which are then privileged to higher ranked members and denied to lower ranked or new recruits (Human

Rights Watch, 2004). This culture of violence permeates all narratives and actions of the group. Recruits are deliberately victimized by physical exploitation and frequently subjugated by corporal punishment (Derluyn et al., 2004; Mulanda, 2009; Shakya, 2011; Vindevogel et al., 2011). Females in particular often suffer the additional burden of brutal and repeated sexual abuse by commanders and fellow recruits (Mazurana et al., 2002; Mulanda, 2009; Shakya, 2011).

In addition to becoming victimized themselves, most of the recruits witness various violent acts committed on a systematic and tremendous scale. High proportions of recruits report witnessing fellow soldiers dying from combat wounds, starvation or mistreatment within the group (Derluyn et al., 2004; Mulanda, 2009; Shakya, 2011; Vindevogel et al., 2011). They are often forced to witness these acts of violence against fellow recruits, as a tactic to install compliance by learning from what happens to disobedient or incapable members (Human Rights Watch, 2003; Wessells, 2006b). Additionally, they often witness the fighting force inflicting violence on civilians, severely injuring and maiming them, often leading to death (Mulanda, 2009; Vindevogel et al., 2011). This deliberate exposure to violence is typically part of a tactic to gradually anestethisize recruits to violence, dehumanize their emotional reactions and moral objections towards it, and harden them in preparation for military life (Denov, 2010; Wessells, 2006b).

Furthermore, the majority of child soldiers also (forcibly) act as perpetrators of atrocities, mostly targeting civilians or other armed factions. Often, they are – under the dictum 'kill or be killed' (Wessells, 2006b, p. 65) – forced to commit the most horrifying atrocities, not seldom leading to death (Denov, 2010; Mulanda, 2009; Vindevogel et al., 2011). A considerable part is applied to other recruits during training, to harden them psychologically and dehumanize them (Human Rights Watch, 2003; Vindevogel et al., 2011; Wessells, 2006b). The same acts of violence they have been trained to do are later inflicted on innocent and defenceless civilians during attacks on villages, Internally Displaced Persons-camps, trading centres, schools, and other resourceful settings (Denov, 2010; Human Rights Watch, 2003; Vindevogel et al., 2011). They are often forced to commit atrocities against their own family and community members, to literally break the connections with the home front, to induce fear for community repercussions, and therefore to decrease the likelihood of escaping and to stimulate attachment to the fighting force (Wessells, 2006b).

Beside assaults on civilians, most recruits are also sent to the battlefield for combat with opposing armed groups and forces, some without being trained or having equivalent weapons to defend themselves (Denov, 2010; Human Rights Watch, 2004). While not all of them are sent for combat because they primarily fulfil other specific tasks within the fighting force, such as cook, porter, spy, babysitter or bodyguard, most armed groups are constantly being snapped at their heels and regularly under attack of opponents, trapping the involved child soldiers in the thick of the fight (Human Rights Watch, 2003; Vindevogel et al., 2011). As a result, the majority of recruited adolescents have been under militarized attack.

As with the patterns of entering the fighting force, there is a constellation of tactics and mechanisms at play within the fighting force that encourage young people to stay or discourage them to return. The duration of the time with the armed group or armed force varies widely and depends greatly on the circumstances and context of child soldiering (Derluyn et al., 2004; Vindevogel et al. 2011). Many of the young recruits manage to emerge relatively soon, some even after one or a few days. However, some of them spend their entire adolescence with the armed group, joining as children but returning as adults. Given the high prevalence of sexual abuse in fighting forces, many child soldiers are children born and raised in this militarized environment (Vindevogel et al., 2011).

1.3 Consequences of child soldiering

These discerned general patterns in child soldiering show that young recruits are in various ways exposed to warfare and endure the most horrifying experiences, as well as fulfil a multifaceted position within armed groups or armed forces. It is beyond doubt that such systematic child abuse and the inherent exposure to warfare may leave a pernicious impact on the well-being of former child soldiers, threatening their health and development (Williams, 2007). Notwithstanding the important finding that the eventual impact of child soldiering on young recruits is largely diverse due to a number of inter-related factors emerging from characteristics in the child soldiering experiences, individuals and their social environment, the living situation outside the armed group, and institutionalized responses, some commonly observed consequences can be expected (Blattman & Annan, 2010; McCallin, 1995; Wessells, 2006b). It should be noted that capturing these consequences of child soldiering is challenging due to methodological constrains. The absence of pre-child soldiering information on these young people and their living situation prevents researchers from discerning pre-existing conditions from what is added by the child

soldiering experiences (Wessells, 2009b). Besides, studies often lack comparable control groups, which restricts possibilities to estimate and understand the effects that can solely be ascribed to child soldiering (Blattman & Annan, 2010; Wessells, 2009b). When working with a comparison group of non-recruited adolescents in the same situation of armed conflict, the differences emerging from comparison rather disclose information on the incremental effects of child soldiering compared to exposure to warfare (Blattman & Annan, 2010). Additionally, many studies examining this child soldiering effect focus on a narrow range of outcomes and do not cover the entire picture of child soldiering effects, creating a fragmented image (Blattman & Annan, 2010). This forms the background against which to interpret the outlined consequences of child soldiering.

1.3.1 Physical consequences

One of the most visible effects of child soldiering is probably the heinous toll it takes on the physical health of the involved young people. The precarious living conditions within the armed group, in which basic needs are hardly met, lead to a multiplicity of health risks. Children deprived from food and health care, as is typically the case within armed groups, become extremely vulnerable and often experience general weakness, malnutrition, and skin diseases, among others (McCallin, 1995). Common diseases, such as diarrhoea or malaria, under normal circumstances relatively curable, may become life-threatening because of the restricted medical attention received in the militarized environment (Wessells, 2006b). Due to their high involvement in combat or attacks by belligerent opponents, many child soldiers become injured or disabled by land mines, bullets or bomb splinters.

Armed groups and forces that use violence against their own members, through applying corporal punishment and torture tactics, often leave their young members severely maimed or disabled. The widespread sexual violence causes many female child soldiers to be pregnant and deliver their baby in utmost difficult circumstances, not seldom leading to complications for mother and/or child (Mazurana et al., 2002). Besides, coerced sexual violence within the armed group may catalyze the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, such as HIV/AIDS, and severely damage the reproductive health of the girls (Mazurana et al., 2002; McCallin, 1995; Wessells, 2006b). As a result of the restricted medical and sanitary provisions within the armed group, diseases and injuries have often reached a far stage upon the emergence of these young people from the fighting force (Wessells, 2006b).

These physical risks are not only directly harmful and threatening for the victim's health, in addition they may bring along a heavy psychological and social burden. Upon return from the armed faction, these physical 'wounds' often form the visible remainders of the time as child soldier, which might be distressing for young people who attempt to forget about their past, and in addition might be triggering stigmatization that is constantly reminding them about their life a child soldier (Wessells, 2006b). Besides, such disabling wounds may impede integration, as these can lead to exclusion from social activities, devaluation of marriageability, and reduction of economic productivity, among other things (Denov, 2010; McCallin, 1995). In addition, these health effects are not only noticeable on an individual level, but may also exact a detrimental effect on the families of these victims and even pose a threat to societies' stability when diseases and disabilities undermine the available human capital (McCallin, 1995; Wessells, 2006b).

1.3.2 Psychological consequences

The horrific nature of child soldiers' experiences during their time in the fighting force is likely to cause profound and persistent psychological wounds (Derluyn & Broekaert, 2010). Albeit variable given the diverse studied contexts, used methods and chosen timeframes (Rodin & van Ommeren, 2009), considerable prevalence levels of psychological distress have been assessed in diverse populations of former child soldiers (Betancourt, Brennan, Rubin-Smith, Fitzmaurice, & Gilman, 2010c; Betancourt et al., 2008; Blattman & Annan, 2010; Boothby, Crawford, & Halperin, 2006; Derluyn et al., 2004; Dickson-Gomez, 2002; Klasen, Oettingen, Daniels, & Adam, 2010; Kohrt et al., 2008). Such psychological distress symptoms that may occur in the wake of child soldiering include a range of internalizing and externalizing problems, such as stress, flashbacks and nightmares, feelings of guilt and shame, sleep disturbances, social isolation, aggressive behaviour, and hyper-arousal, as well as a range of psychosomatic complains such as headache, stomach ache, and decreased appetite (Derluyn & Broekaert, 2010; Somasundaram, 2002; Wessells, 2006b).

Besides, former child soldiers are typically thought of as being aggressive and violent in their behaviour and interaction with others, even long after leaving the fighting force. This is often attributed to a modified moral sense and tweaked norms and values as a result of life in the armed faction. In the context of armed conflict and particularly military training, as is the case in situations of child soldiering, extreme violence may become normalized and expressed in both ideology and action, which might permeate the moral

development and behaviour of young recruits (Wessells, 2006b). Other explanations draw on the expression of inner psychological distress, that, when not adequately addressed, may be externalized to channel unbearable tension and may evolve in aggressive behaviours, fear and suspicion, and violent interaction patterns (Wessells, 2006b). Evidence illustrates, however, that formerly recruited adolescents show little difference in aggression compared to non-recruited counterparts and that only few continue their violent, aggressive lifestyle (Blattman & Annan, 2010; Boothby et al., 2006).

Some studies have shown that such psychological symptoms are more prevalent among formerly recruited adolescents compared to their non-recruited counterparts, illustrating the added detrimental effect of child soldiering compared to war-exposure outside the fighting force on the mental health and development of former young recruits (Annan, Blattman, Carlson, & Mazurana, 2007; Betancourt et al., 2008; MacMullin & Loughry, 2002; Somasundaram, 2002). Such comparative findings are rather scant and inconsistent, due to a dearth of studies including a control group or controlling indicators. However, there is broad support for the added role of aversive child soldiering events, as studies indicate that those former child soldiers who have experienced the most and severe war-events are often also the ones experiencing the most and severe psychological distress afterwards (Betancourt et al., 2008; Blattman & Annan, 2010; Kohrt et al., 2008). This is referred to as the 'dose-effect' relationship between adversity-related factors and psychological well-being (Blattman & Annan, 2008; Miller & Rasmussen, 2010; Mollica et al., 1998).

It is crucial to note that the prevalence and persistence of these symptoms is very diverse across the population of formerly recruited youngsters, and likely influenced by a multiplicity of factors and subtle processes related to the circumstances of child soldiering, the individual characteristics and the response of the environment turned to subsequent to leaving the armed group. How these symptoms evolve over time is less evident due to a scarcity of longitudinal studies in this field. The few studies that shed light on the longer term outcomes of formerly recruited youngsters show persistent manifestation of psychological distress symptoms (Betancourt, Borisova et al., 2010; Boothby et al., 2006; Vindevogel, Coppens, De Schryver, Loots, Broekaert, & Derluyn, 2012). This implies that child soldiering experiences cause severe psychological distress in a significant number of formerly recruited adolescents, for whom time alone does not sufficiently alleviate the suffering.

1.3.3 Social consequences

Child soldiering may elicit challenges towards the inclusion of formerly recruited youngsters into war-affected societies. Young people who enter a fighting force are uprooted from their homes and communities, and from the wider social fabric. They are separated from their primary caregivers, the parents or relatives, and significant others including siblings and friends. In situations of armed conflict, forcing people to seek refuge in safer regions or protected areas, their social network typically becomes scattered (Annan, Brier, & Arymo, 2009; Miller & Rasco, 2004). As a consequence, traces of relatives may be erased by the warfare, homes may be destroyed, and assets may be lost, filling the formerly recruited youngsters with a sense of alienation upon return from the armed group (Annan et al., 2009). The lack of support figures who play a vital role in the transition of formerly recruited adolescents, through providing support and protection and also facilitating the bond with the wider social and cultural aspects of integration (Ager, 2006), may severely jeopardize the social well-being and integration of formerly recruited young people.

During their time with the armed group or armed force, young people have been away from the society in which they are supposed to develop a meaningful social role and life project. Over time, societal norms and role expectations might be erased and replaced by military norms and roles, and hence be perceived as alien by formerly recruited adolescents (Wessells, 2006b). Some child soldiers enter the armed group as children but return as adults, a social role that implies a huge discrepancy with the former reference frameworks of both the military role as soldier and the societal role as child (Vindevogel, Broekaert, & Derluyn, in press). Upon return from the armed group, they may feel out of control with respect to their own lives and experience a deteriorated sense of identity and belonging (De Boeck & Honwana, 2005; Vindevogel, Broekaert et al., in press; Wessells, 2006b). Within the society, they may be regarded as misfits that do not adhere to the socially expected roles or are not able to perform the expected daily tasks. This may cause formerly recruited adolescents to remain viewed as former soldiers rather than civilians, which may seriously jeopardize their social inclusion into society (Annan et al., 2009).

Given that many war casualties are inflicted on civilians and that young recruits tend to be extensively involved in these hostilities, strong judgmental feelings towards military involvement may prevail in society (Barenbaum et al., 2004). Former child soldiers therefore tend to occupy a very dubious position in society, oscillating between images of victim and perpetrator (Blattman & Annan, 2008; Derluyn & Broekaert, 2010;

Honwana, 2006). Detrimental social processes like stigmatization, discrimination, hostility and social tension regarding formerly recruited young people have been observed in the wake of child soldiering (Betancourt, Agnew-Blais et al., 2010; Derluyn et al., 2004; Vindevogel, Coppens et al., 2012). Generally, however, former child soldiers report relatively high levels of social acceptance and tend to experience equal levels of support from their social environment, compared to non-recruited youth (Annan et al., 2006; Blattman & Annan, 2010). Notwithstanding, stigmatization related to the former child soldier status remains an important challenge faced by many formerly recruited youngsters, often constituting a source of psychological distress (Betancourt, Agnew-Blais et al., 2010; Denov, 2010; Derluyn, 2011; Vindevogel, Coppens et al., 2012).

1.3.4 Educational and economic consequences

Child soldiering's most damaging effect is often considered to derive from the inevitable restriction of educational and economic opportunities while in the fighting force, causing a range of related challenges long after leaving the armed group (Betancourt et al., 2008; Blattman & Annan, 2010; McCallin, 1995; Wessells, 2006b). Within the fighting force, young people may have acquired knowledge and may be trained in certain skills that are relevant in a militarized system. Yet while some of these can be valuable in a societal context, formerly recruited youngsters are rather unlikely to be equipped with marketable skills that were acquired in the context of formal education or work experience (Blattman & Annan, 2010; Wessells, 2006a). Upon return, formerly recruited young people do not always have the possibility or motivation to return or start going to school, and when they do, often have to join lower age-classes and experience learning difficulties or trouble in catching up with the school system (Wessells, 2006b). Many of them engage in income-generating activities and are able to regain a foothold in the economic life (Boothby et al., 2006), but they tend to have more difficulties with finding skilled work and earning wages comparable to those of their non-recruited counterparts (Blattman & Annan, 2010). As such, the years of lost opportunities to acquire knowledge and skills or economic capital are hardly recuperated.

Formerly recruited adolescents who return do so mostly empty-handed, as they have hardly acquired any money or assets during their time with the armed groups or forces (Human Rights Watch, 2004). In the realm of armed conflict, properties are often looted, destroyed or disowned, providing formerly recruited youngsters with little to turn to. In cases where the head of the household, who was previously generating income for the family and

providing basic requirements for its members, is no longer able or available, formerly recruited adolescents may be expected to take up this role without knowing well how nor having the capacities to head a household. Such conditions may lead formerly recruited youth in situations wherein they fail to meet their own and their family's basic needs, are unable to make up for the loss and disruption, and eventually decline into ever worsening poverty (Wessells, 2006a).

The broad-based and long-lasting impact of child soldiering on educational and economic capacities and chances of former young recruits forms a significant psychological burden (Vindevogel, De Schryver, Broekaert, & Derluyn, in press) and may jeopardize integration into society (Wessells, 2006b). It often leaves former child soldiers extremely vulnerable in the light of the already damaged economic fabric and impoverished circumstances (McCallin, 1995). Additionally, the lack of marketable skills and economic capital does not only affect individuals and their families' livelihoods and economic well-fare, but also creates considerable challenges to the societal skilled-labour market in terms of productivity and growth in the longer term (Blattman & Annan, 2010; Vargas, 2009).

1.3.5 Political consequences

Contemporary war strategies are applied to enforce fear and compliance among civilians and to prevent and punish their allegiance with the opponent (Vargas, 2009). Some strategies are designed to propagate ethnic and religious stereotypes, so as to install allegiance with the ethnic or religious fighting cause, and thereby provoke extremely destructive social tension and separation (Miller & Rasco, 2004). In conflicts in which civilians are involved in the perpetration of these strategies, as is the case with child soldiering, an extremely divisive effect may be exerted on nations. Such practices may induce distrust and hatred in the affected population and lead to vengeance and reprisals among civilians (Collier et al., 2003; Kaldor, 1999; Miller & Rasco, 2004; Vargas, 2009). Hence, practices of child soldiering may plant and cultivate the seeds of future social tension, violence and conflict, long after the cessation of warfare. This poses severe challenges to the process of conflict resolution, sustainable transition and political stabilization in its aftermath.

Formerly recruited young people are because of their war-experiences sometimes thought of as ticking time-bombs, threatening the stability of a nation in post-conflict transition, yet there is scant evidence to support this view (Blattman & Annan, 2010). What might be cause for concern, however,

is that persisting psychological distress, social tension, dissatisfaction with living conditions, alienation and marginalization of formerly recruited youth form a real threat to the society's stability, as it may enforce the root causes of child soldiering and warfare at large (Blattman & Annan, 2010; Wessells, 2006b). As such, child soldiering clearly has paramount effects on the political situation of a nation in armed conflict and therefore elicits implications for peace building and the prevention of recurrent cycles of warfare (Wessells, 2006b).

1.3.6 And beyond …

This overview demonstrates that the potential impact of child soldiering is not restricted to direct war-exposure and related physical and psychological challenges for former child soldiers. Rather it is likely to occur through the dynamic interplay between direct and indirect pathways, affecting different and interweaved aspects of life, and reaching far beyond the individual (Betancourt, Brennan et al., 2010; Fernando, Miller, & Berger, 2010; Miller & Rasmussen, 2010). The far reaching societal impacts create a complex emergency situation, encompassing multifaceted and multilevel disruption in political, social, health, economic and cultural aspects of life, which impinge on the psychosocial well-being of involved individuals (Goodhand & Hulme, 1999; Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2004; Wisner & Adams, 2002). In such complex emergencies, multiple sources of vulnerability arise for formerly recruited young people, leaving them at risk and in need for psychosocial support in the wake of child soldiering. Moreover, these consequences of war linger on in the shape of profound and persistent challenges, extending well beyond the cessation of warfare (Beneduce et al., 2006; Ghobarah, Huth & Russett, 2003; Machel, 2001; Pedersen, 2002).

1.4 Psychosocial responses to child soldiering

Diverse paradigms that underlie initiatives to support the psychosocial well-being of formerly recruited young people have fuelled dissension in understanding and responding to the impact of child soldiering, which will be outlined below.

1.4.1 The historical predominance of a biomedical approach

The history of research on the psychosocial well-being of populations living in situations of armed conflict, such as child soldiers, has been dominated

notably by a biomedical focus on traumatology, which emerged against the backdrop of the post-traumatic stress disorder idiom (Bracken, Giller, & Summerfield, 1995; Miller, Kulkarni, & Kushner, 2006; Summerfield, 2001). Humanitarian responses to child soldiering have equally been grounded in such a trauma-focused approach, based on the premise that the psychological effects of child soldiering form the focal concern of the victimized young people (Blattman & Annan, 2010; Bracken et al., 1995; Miller & Rasmussen, 2010; Summerfield, 2001; Wessells, 2006b). Former child soldiers are often regarded as psychologically damaged goods, who are irreparably lost as a consequence of the extremely stressful events they are exposed to (Annan et al., 2009; Wessells, 2006b) and therefore are in need of specialized and intensive treatment of the persistent and pervasive psychological trauma (Bracken et al., 1995; Summerfield, 2001). Such approaches are preoccupied with the alleviation or amelioration of symptoms of psychological distress, often realized through psychotherapy or psychopharmacological drugs. While biomedical approaches have contributed greatly to the understanding of individual trauma and its treatment, they are likely to be insufficient and easily overstretched in the context of disasters and mass casualties (de Jong, 2002; Hobfoll, Horsey, & Lamoureux, 2009). As a result of the growing awareness of the outlined extensive and diverse ways in which child soldiering may impinge on the psychosocial well-being of formerly recruited young people, the need to move beyond this biomedical model becomes apparent. Consequently, the biomedical model recently became increasingly contested for its narrow trauma-focused, individualistic, universalizing and pathologizing approach (Bracken, Giller, & Summerfield, 1995; Miller, Kulkarni, & Kushner, 2006; Summerfield, 2001).

1.4.2 Towards an integrative approach

A main objection is that singling out traumatology from the multiple and multilayered post-child soldiering consequences is likely to misapprehend the complex reality and to disregard other salient challenges and needs of former child soldiers (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010; Wessells & Monteiro, 2006). As shown in the overview of consequences, the impact of child soldiering cuts across many different life domains, which implies that the psychological impact is embedded in a spectrum of other consequences impinging on the individual and its surroundings. Research has illustrated that these other consequences, such as educational and economic challenges, are perceived as equally or even more significant and that these often constitute a prior concern for formerly recruited youngsters

(Vindevogel, De Schryver et al., in press). Besides, the myriad of consequences on other life domains may fully predict, mediate or moderate the impact of war exposure on former child soldiers' psychosocial well-being, and therefore may hinder the alleviation of child soldiering-related psychological distress and even account for additional psychological distress in the wake of child soldiering (Derluyn & Broekaert, 2010; Miller & Rasmussen, 2010). Hence, the trauma-focused model is considered too narrow to grasp the array of disruption and the constellation of challenges caused by child soldiering, and is therefore inadequate to address the more complex effects child soldiering has on formerly recruited adolescents (Boothby, 2008; Miller et al., 2006; Miller & Rasco, 2004; Summerfield, 1996). Consequently, an interdisciplinary and integrative focus on the dynamics of interrelated life domains that are possibly affected by child soldiering and that are in their turn affecting former child soldiers' psychosocial well-being may create a response to child soldiering that better meets the complex reality and needs of formerly recruited youngsters (Derluyn, Mels, Parmentier, & Vandenhole, 2012; Kohrt et al., 2010; Miller & Rasmussen, 2010; Rasmussen & Annan, 2010).

1.4.3 Towards a systemic approach

Another concern is that an individualistic approach falls short of acknowledging and addressing the context wherein individual experiences are shaped through communal experiences of suffering from and dealing with the consequences of warfare. As outlined in the overview of consequences, the impact of child soldiering extends well beyond the individual level and affects the very social fabric of society, creating an array of communal challenges including relational, cultural, and justice-related domains (Vindevogel, De Schryver et al., in press). This is especially prevalent in societies that have an inherent collectivistic orientation, where responses to such aversive events and consequent challenges amplify throughout the many, interconnected lines of social ties, understandings and practices, rendering 'healing' a rather communal than individual process (Summerfield, 2001). In such contexts, individualistic approaches may fail to give sufficient acknowledgment to the injustice and suffering that was inflicted upon entire populations and to their shared understanding and responding to the challenges they encounter, which ought to be situated on the intersection between individual and collective processes. Consequently, singling out individuals and solely supporting individual well-being risks reinforcing possible war-induced fragmentation and thereby doing harm in affected societies (Wessells, 2006b). Alternatively, individuals should be

regarded and approached as nested within families, nested within larger social networks, nested within tribes and culture, etc. that create the context wherein individual well-being is shaped (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Hobfoll, 2001). This implies that the focus of healing individual psychological wounds of war should be complemented by mending the war-affected surroundings at all levels (Ager, Boothby, & Bremer, 2009; Miller & Rasco, 2004).

1.4.4 Towards a strengths-based approach

An additional argument concerns the model's emphasis on deficits and problems, stemming from its roots in pathogenesis, i.e. the science committed to mechanisms causing disease (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Aber & Jones, 1997; Avard & Tipper, 1997; Ben-Arieh & Goerge, 2001; Andrews & Ben-Arieh, 1999; Pittman & Irby, 1997). This has resulted in problem-centric approaches to well-being, preoccupied with the process of 'healing' from a deficit to what is considered as normal. Such problem-centric approaches that concentrate on deficits, suffering and weaknesses risk overlooking people's efforts and the resources that they employ to deal with the challenges they face. After all, not all former child soldiers show upon return manifest profound or persistent psychological distress and many manage to function well although the inner experience of it, which convenes with findings on other populations exposed to adversity (Betancourt, Borisova et al., 2010; Klasen, Oettingen, Daniels, Post, Hoyer, & Adam, 2010; Wessells, 2006b). Such findings previously fostered interest in salutogenesis, i.e. the science concerned with mechanisms supporting human health and well-being (Antonovsky, 1979). This engendered a movement that pursues the understanding of what helps people to maintain or regain well-being consequent to situations that are expected to considerably affect it (Kaplan, 2005; Layne, Beck, Rimmasch, Southwick, Moreno, & Hobfoll, 2009; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Masten & Obradovic, 2008; Rutter, 2006; Ungar, 2008) and generated the insight that a range of intra- and interpersonal factors and processes can enact as resources that strengthen the individual's capacity to deal with aversive situations (Wessells, 2009b). This increased attention to young people's sources and mechanisms of support contributes to a more complete image of psychosocial trajectories in the wake of child soldiering, and thereby does justice to the analytically complex reality of their adaptability and functionality, owing to a dynamic interplay between challenges and resources on the continuum between vulnerability and resiliency.

1.4.5 Towards a culturally sensitive approach

Another critique draws on the observation that trauma-focused models are typically developed in the global West, are rooted in its culture-specific assumptions, values and practices, and therefore have limited validity in culturally different contexts (Shalev, Yehuda, & McFarlane, 2000). Nonetheless, these Western notions of epidemiology and nosology of distress and appropriate treatment models are often proposed as universal, but do not necessarily represent indigenous manifestations and idioms of psychosocial needs, nor do they embody the local ways of dealing with psychosocial challenges (Wessells & Monteiro, 2006). When applied in culturally diverse contexts through power-relationships between the service providers and the beneficiaries, this essentially involves the risk of privileging this Western framework and imposing it upon divergent approaches, rendering it a potential neo-colonial tool (Summerfield, 2001). As a result, externally introduced mental health services are often considered alien and are therefore underutilized by the people (Miller & Rasco, 2004). Many cultures have their own specific ways of understanding and dealing with psychological distress, which are often rooted in different cosmologies and other spiritual frameworks, that are at odds with what Western psychological services represent and proclaim (Honwana, 2006; Wessells & Monteiro, 2006). In order to capture and represent such cultural particularity, there is a need for opportunities for collaborative reflection and programming, whereby external agencies draw upon the local partners' expertise with regard to salient psychosocial needs, resources and pathways to promote well-being, and relevant psychosocial well-being indicators (Honwana, 2006; Miller & Rasco, 2004).

1.4.6 Ways forward

Such critical reflections do not represent a negation of the considerable psychological impact of child soldiering and the consequent psychological distress and suffering of formerly recruited young people. The consistent association of child soldiering with psychological distress, as shown in the many reports on post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, etc., shows that there is a set of highly inter-correlated symptoms of distress that are likely to develop in the aftermath of child soldiering, which should be adequately addressed (Miller & Rasco, 2004; Summerfield, 2001; Wessells, 2009b). What these critical reflections do suggest and urge for, is that approaches to such psychological distress are not singled out, but rather part of an integrative approach incorporating other life domains that are

interweaved with the psychosocial well-being; are not de-contextualizing individuals from their surroundings but incorporate the communal processes that play a crucial role in their manifestation of and responses to psychosocial distress; are not solely focussing on the pathology and difficulties but acknowledge and empower the strengths and resources of these young people; and are not just copied cross-culturally but designed in a culturally sensitive manner representing local understandings and responses to psychosocial distress.

1.5 Problem statement, research questions and aims

1.5.1 Problem statement

The central research question and aims emerged from a thorough revision of the extant literature on former child soldiers' transition and well-being in the wake of child soldiering and some notable niches that were consequently identified.

1.5.1.1 Limitations of established concepts for framing the transformative and prolonged process from military to civilian life

Across a variety of scientific disciplines within medicine, humanities and social sciences, the term 'rehabilitation' has widely been applied when referring to the restoration of the mental health and functionality of former child soldiers (Williams, 2007). This conceptualization has been criticized because it endorses the idea that people need to obtain a certain endpoint that approaches normality, whereby deviant patterns are restored into more ordinary patterns (Van Hove, 1997). Moreover, it represents a unidirectional, individual effort whereby the need for adjustment is solely assigned to formerly recruited young people. Alternative views embody a reciprocal process whereby both the individual and the social environment are challenged to move towards an often war-shattered sense of community in which all people with their own particularities are valued members.

Similarly, the well-established term 'reintegration' has become more contested for it tends to suggest that former child soldiers return to the situation they knew before, while in fact this situation has often been considerably altered by war (Wessells, 2006b). This becomes apparent in for instance the loss of caretakers, disruption of houses, and displacement into camps, which make 'homecoming' sound like an euphemism and raise the question what former child soldiers are supposed to reintegrate into

(Wessells, 2006b). Moreover, the preceding situation often nurtured the very roots of warfare and therefore requires a transformation rather than recuperation (McCallin, 1995; Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, 2008; Somasundaram, 2002).

Besides, former child soldiers are typically involved in a long-term process that can stretch over several years, reaching well beyond the singular points of 'reunification' with relatives and 'reinsertion' in society (Wessells, 2006b). All this stretches the boundaries of well-established conceptualizations such as rehabilitation and reintegration, and suggests the rethinking of their appropriateness in the light of emerging concepts that might better represent the reality, such as the concept 'transition'. This stimulates research on former child soldiers to consider the prolonged, mutual and transformative nature of the processes they are involved in after they have emerged from the armed group or armed force.

1.5.1.2 Lack of systematic assessment of the challenges and according needs of former child soldiers

An extensive body of research has focused on establishing prevalence rates of psychiatric syndromes in post-conflict settings, whereas challenges encountered by war-affected populations are likely to cut across various life domains and to cover a much broader ground, including a constellation of direct and indirect multisectoral consequences of child soldiering as well as pre-existing and rather structural conditions of the setting (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010). Given their often fully predicting, moderating or mediating role in the relationship between child soldiering and former child soldiers' well-being, these multiple challenges should be addressed in an integrative manner (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010; Wessells, 2009a).

Besides, current research in this domain mainly draws on pre-constructed scales and probes for the incidence of a selected set of predefined potentially stressful experiences and conditions (Miller & Rasco, 2004; Rasmussen & Annan, 2009). Moreover, these selected challenges mostly represent the perspectives of adults that are not necessarily representative of those of children (Betancourt & Khan, 2009). Hence, these methods may lead to fragmented images that possibly disregard the subjective significance of the measured challenges and overlook less self-evident but important other challenges (Tol, Patel, Tomlinson, Baingana, Galappatti, Panter-Brick et al., 2011). Consequently, there is a need for inductive methods that allow people to express their ideas unbiased and unrestricted by a priori hypotheses on the existence and pertinence of challenges.

Moreover, while it is widely assumed that the child soldiering experience may take an immense toll on the lives of formerly recruited young people, possibly creating distinct psychosocial challenges, studies seldom include a comparison with non-recruited counterparts. This limits the concerned field with a lack of evidence (Betancourt, Borisova, Rubin-Smith, Gingerich, Williams, & Agnew-Blais, 2008; Kohrt, Jordans, Tol, Perera, Karki, Koirala et al., 2008). The few studies that did include a control group or controlling indicators have hitherto delivered inconsistent findings with regard to psychological distress, social acceptance, education and livelihood (Annan et al., 2006; Betancourt et al., 2008; Kohrt et al., 2008; Williamson & Robinson, 2006). These observations urge for studies that include both recruited and non-recruited young people.

1.5.1.3 Disproportional focus on deficits and underrepresentation of resources and strengths of former child soldiers

A common flaw of studies on the psychosocial well-being of war-affected populations is to ignore the strengths people are endowed with and instead focus solely on deficits – the weaknesses, suffering and pathology – of the population under study (Wessells, 2009a). This has fostered the portrayal of former child soldiers as a lost generation that is affected by insurmountable problems (Annan et al., 2009). However, research has pointed to the fact that not all former child soldiers show upon return profound or persistent psychological distress and many manage to function well despite the experience of distress. This motivates a focus on the strengths and resources of former child soldiers, in order to strike a realistic balance and counter the extant biased image (Wessells, 2009a).

Research on resources and resilience in sub-Saharan Africa and more particular in regions affected by armed conflict is still in its infancy. This brings forward the imperious urge for an elaboration of resilience research, to create a culturally grounded understanding of what is key to resilient psychosocial processes in the wake of war (Wessells, 2009a). Moreover, the extant studies on what helps former child soldiers in transition from military to civilian life have mostly utilized methods that identify the role of pre-supposed protective factors on outcome measures. There is scant research on the meaning that resources have for formerly recruited young people, and how and why these are perceived as helpful (Layne, Warren, Shalev, & Watson, 2007; Luthar, 2006; Pat-Horenczyk Rabinowitz, Rice, & Tucker-Levin, 2009). Therefore, there is need for research designs that stimulate the exploration of the locally and subjective relevant resources of these young people.

Moreover, given the devastating impact of warfare on societies, communal resource reservoirs might become threatened or depleted, which possibly affects the ability and readiness to propound or share resources within affected communities (Boothby, Strang, & Wessells, 2006; Psychosocial Working Group, 2002). Besides, pre-existing or war-induced social barriers may exist that prevent former child soldiers from accessing or effectuating their resources, and therefore form considerable impediments to their resilience (Pick & Sirkin, 2010). In addition, previous research indicated that people do not only need objectively available resources but also the emotional and cognitive perception of these opportunities and their accessibility (Pick & Sirkin, 2010). This urges for an exploration of the resources of former child soldiers in comparison with their non-recruited counterparts.

1.5.2 Research questions

Taking into account the outlined state of the art of research on former child soldiers' transition as well as the aforementioned niches and recommendations, the central research question of this study is "*what helps former child soldiers in dealing with past experiences and present challenges in the course of their transition from military to civilian life?".*

This question is subdivided into the following specific research questions:

1) What are the past war-related experiences of former child soldiers?
2) Which child soldiering-related and post-child soldiering factors are associated with the longer term psychosocial well-being of former child soldiers?
3) What are the present challenges former child soldiers encounter, and do these differ from their non-recruited counterparts?
4) What are resources that help former child soldiers to deal with challenges, and do these differ from their non-recruited counterparts?
5) What is the underlying meaning of resources that are valued in dealing with the challenges encountered in the transition from the military to society?
6) How do challenges and resources interact and shape the transition trajectories of former child soldiers?
7) How can informal and formal support systems contribute to the resources of former child soldiers?

1.5.3 Research aims

The overall objective of this research is to gain insight as to what helps former child soldiers deal with their past experiences and current challenges in the course of their transition from military to civilian life. By adopting an integrative, systemic, strengths-based and culturally sensitive approach, we strive to address understudied domains and to occupy a niche in this state of the art research. In pursuit of this objective, this study endeavours the overarching aim of contributing to the scientific theoretical framework on former child soldiers' transition, challenges and resources in the wake of child soldiering and possibly also to the broader scientific knowledge base on challenges, resources and resilience of populations in (post-)conflict settings. Moreover, the study aims to inform policy and humanitarian interventions supporting the transition and improvement of resources for former child soldiers and supporting the resilience of their communities as a whole. Through working with the perspective of young people and focusing on the grassroots processes, this study wishes to deliver useful handles to move the field forward in supporting populations in (post-)conflict setting based on the sources of strength and processes of support available in local settings.

1.6 Terminology

1.6.1 Transition

'Transition' is generally defined as a change process occurring at specific periods or turning points during the life course (Vogler, Crivello, & Woodhead, 2008). Transition is not a one-point event, but entails a chain of consecutive events that culminate in a multi-layered and often a multi-year process, therefore named a 'trajectory' (Felner, Farber, & Primavera, 1983; Hobfoll, 1989; Petriwskyj, Thorpe, & Tayler, 2005; Wilcox, 1986). A distinction is usually made between vertical and horizontal transitions. Vertical transitions are upward passages over consecutive stages in the lifespan, whereas horizontal transitions are passages over various domains of life (Vogler et al., 2008). The passage from military to civilian life is a horizontal transition whereby former child soldiers move from the warring faction to the war-affected society, which involves altered settings, role expectations and living conditions (De Boeck & Honwana, 2005). Because of the disconnection, dissonance and adaptation involved in the passage over different states, transition may be potentially distressing (Becker, 1999;

Grimes, 2002; Turner, 1967; van Gennep, 1960). However, when successfully dealt with through the use of resources, transitions may provide opportunities that may even lead to growth (Layne et al., 2009; Vogler et al., 2008).

1.6.2 Resilience

Science of resilience is a relatively young discipline, yet has known various waves of research that have significantly fostered the understanding and conceptualization of psychosocial well-being despite aversive experiences (Luthar, 2006; Masten, 2001; Rutter, 2006). While resilience is typically defined in individual terms, the adopted theoretical frameworks motivate a conceptualization that reaches beyond the individual level. Assimilating knowledge from earlier waves, resilience is currently regarded as a broad systems construct defined as "*the capacity of dynamic systems to withstand or recover from significant disturbances*" (Masten, 2007, p. 921). This implies that the resilience concept does not only refer to individual development but also applies to the systems wherein it is imbedded, for which it is often named 'community resilience' or 'ecological resilience' (Tol, Jordans, Reis, & de Jong, 2009; Wessells, 2012). Besides, it entails a dynamic state that alters as threatening (challenges) and supportive (resources) factors in the social environment increase or reduce (Johnson & Howard, 2007). In situations wherein individuals and their environments reciprocally accommodate and progressively move towards a 'person-environment fit' regarding demands and resources, resilience is fostered (Boothby et al., 2006; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Hobfoll, 1998). Resilience has been evident in the occurrence of stress resistance, reasonably good functioning in the face of adversity, and recovery or positive transformation (Kaplan, 2005; Layne et al., 2009; Luthar et al., 2000; Masten & Obradovic, 2008; Rutter, 2006).

1.6.3 Resources

Resources are situated within individuals, their social environment, their culture and values, and the broader political and economic climate of their society (Hobfoll, 1989; Psychosocial Working Group, 2002). Individuals are endowed with a great array of resources, which is often referred to as human capital and includes cognitive-behavioural coping strategies, livelihood, personal values, among others. Moreover, the environment is a rich reservoir of resources, and agents in this environment may act as a vehicle to obtain these resources in addition to those endowed to the individual, such as social services, employment, and cultural ceremonies.

Resources can thus be internal and external, distal and proximal, biological and cultural, which urges for a broad definition (Hobfoll, 2002). Throughout this dissertation, the following conceptualization of 'resources' is applied: "*those entities that either are centrally valued in their own right (e.g., self-esteem, close attachments, health, and inner peace), or act as a means to obtain centrally valued ends (e.g., money, social support, and credit)*" (Hobfoll, 2002, p. 307). The concept of 'resources' differs from but incorporates the related concept of 'coping', which refers to the cognitive-behavioural strategies that people apply when appraising challenge (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

1.6.4 Challenges

The concept of 'challenge' is proposed as an alternative for terms like 'problem', 'pathology' or 'deficit', which all represent the underlying assumption that people are inevitably and often irreversibly damaged by the experienced adversity (Wolin, 2012). While the concept 'challenge' also conveys the view that adversity is a potential or actual threat to one's well-being, it incorporates the possibility that people do not succumb to the hardship, but are often incited by it to resist or rebound from harm (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, De Longis, & Gruen, 1986; Wolin, 2012). Adversities are primarily regarded as challenging and only prove problematic to the extent that they overthrow or deplete the resources that one has in stock or is able to mobilize in order to counterbalance the involved potential demands and loss (Hobfoll, 1989). However, when the resources that one is endowed with fit and successfully meet the demands, the development of loss and resultant problems can be offset. In conclusion, the use of the term 'challenge' throughout this dissertation implies that adversities are reframed and reinterpreted as challenging rather than problematic, and recognizes the likelihood that people experience only trivial or transient impact of it (Hobfoll, 1989; Wolin, 2012).

1.6.5 Psychosocial well-being

Psychosocial well-being is in this study preferred over the concept of 'mental health', which under the influence of the overly biomedical approach has been narrowed down to the neurobiological aspects of individual mental disorders or well-being (Betancourt & Williams, 2008; Wessells & Monteiro, 2006). The concept of 'psychosocial well-being' has therefore been developed to emphasize the importance of non-biological aspects that also play a significant role in psychological well-being

(Betancourt & Williams, 2008; Wessells & Monteiro, 2006) and to highlight that individual psychological well-being is inextricably connected to the processes in the social environment (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2007; van Ommeren, Saxena, & Saraceno, 2005). As a result, 'psychosocial well-being' is conceived as defined by relationships between the individual and significant others, their surroundings, and the cultural and spiritual world, and as essentially encompassing integrally interrelated psychological, social, physical, material, spiritual, economic, cultural, … aspects and processes (Loughry & Eyber, 2003; Honwana, 1998; The Psychosocial Working Group, 2002; Williamson & Robinson, 2006).

1.7 Theoretical framework of the study

This research inscribed itself into the orthopedagogical scientific discipline. Orthopedagogics, derived from the Greek words 'orthos' (correct, straighten), 'pais' (child), and 'agogien' (lead, guide, accompany), is characterized by the integrative and transactional use of alternatively cohering theories and methods, always with the inherent purpose of meaningful action in special pedagogical situations and the broader context these are embedded in (Broekaert, 2000; Pretorius, 1976; Van Hove, 1997). It thus departs from the basic premise that there is no central theory by which to guide orthopedagogical action (Broekaert, D'Oosterlinck, Van Hove, & Bayliss, 2004). As a consequence, orthopedagogics can be founded in empiricism and/or ratio and can aim to explain ('*erklären*') and/or understand ('*verstehen*'), thereby using nomothetic and/or ideographic methods (Broekaert, 2009). This reflects the permeability of research theories, models, methods and methodologies that are integrated in pursuit of permanent transitions that bring the research on a higher quality level (Broekaert, 2009). Hence, the alternation of the following theoretical frameworks permits an integrated approach of the research question and aims.

Moreover, the dissertation attempted to take into consideration the main shortcomings of traditional approaches and to adhere to the alternative directions as outlined above, which is reflected in the deliberately chosen theoretical framework. While the historically predominant biomedical framework has increasingly been subjected to criticism, it also has merits when integrated with other, complementing paradigms. Hence, this study reaches beyond the scope of psychiatric epidemiology by applying a broadened focus on the dynamics of interrelated life domains and social layers and on the indigenous manifestations and perceptions of transition and the challenges and resources that shape its trajectory. This may create a

scientific understanding of and response to transition in the wake of child soldiering that better represents the complexity of the reality, the needs and the strengths of formerly recruited young people.

1.7.1 Social ecological systems theory

In order to counterbalance the dominance and compensate the shortcomings of individualistic approaches to former child soldiers' well-being in the wake of child soldiering, this study essentially departs from a notion of 'individual-in-context'. The literature on children living in situations of armed conflict has increasingly drawn on the ecological model of human development as initially outlined by Bronfenbrenner (1979) (Tol et al., 2009). This ecological model builds on the premise that child development occurs within nested social systems, and delineates how factors in the ecology of the individual influence the development of the human potential (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The ecology is conceptualized as discerned into various nested layers/systems surrounding the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1999; Paquette & Ryan, 2011). Bronfenbrenner (1979, p. 22-26) originally distinguished and defined four systems:

- *Microsystem*: a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics
- *Mesosystem*: the interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates
- *Exosystem*: one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant, but in which events occur that affect, or are affected by, what happens in the setting containing the developing person
- *Macrosystem*: consistencies, in the form and content of lower-order systems (micro-, meso-, and exo-) that exist, or could exist, at the level of the subculture or the culture as a whole, along with any belief systems or ideology underlying such consistencies.

However, current social ecological theories operationalize the ecology rather as a system of intertwined ecological levels, including the family, peer groups, the community and society (Tol et al., 2009). Individual development is conceptualized as an ongoing dynamic process of an individual's perception of and reaction to the environment. This is in turn determined by the influence of social ecological factors on the individual and how the individual deals with these influences (Reifsnider, Gallagher, &

Forgione, 2005). As such, this model assigns equal importance to bio-psychological and socio-ecological factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1999).

From this framework, war-strategies that target civilians, such as child soldiering, are believed to not only affect individual victims but exert a multilevel impact on families, communities, and societies and therefore affect the very social fabric of life (Miller et al., 2006; Tol et al., 2009). Alternatively, social ecologies are seen as inherently endowed with potential and strengths that may be transacted and reinforced across the different ecological levels, and that can offset the toll that such strategies may inflict on people's lives. This implies that the former child soldiers' well-being is inextricably related to the way their social environment is affected by and is able to deal with the ecological shock caused by warfare (Miller et al., 2006; Wessells, 2009b).

Research that draws on this theoretical framework should therefore include a broad and contextualized analysis of the multiple influences that emanate from the social ecology and impinge on former child soldiers' well-being (cf. systematic approach). The inclusion of the context also allows accounting for cultural particularities that are situated on the macrolevel and shape the specific context of research (cf. culturally sensitive approach). In this study, the essential unit of analysis is the individual formerly recruited young person, framed within an inextricable and interconnected social ecology. This theoretical background is apparent in the systematic inclusion of contextual factors as potential associations with the longer term psychosocial well-being of formerly recruited young people (study 2), as challenges and resources that shape their post-child soldiering trajectory (study 3 & 4) and as targets of informal and formal support systems (study 3).

1.7.2 Resource-based theory

As an antidote to the overly deficit-oriented approaches, this research departs from resource-based theories of well-being. Humanities have increasingly studied the existence and role of psychosocial resources in dealing with stressful experiences and in promoting well-being, which led to the proliferation of resource-based theories. Hobfoll (2002) clusters these theories in Key Resources Theories, Multiple-Component Resource Theories, Integrated Resource Models, and Life Span Resource Models, and he developed the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory that gained firm ground over the years in studying post-adversity transition. COR-theory is an Integrated Resource Model, characterised by a focus on (a) a broad

spectrum of resources, (b) potential or actual change of resource in the face of challenges, and (c) a resource reservoir as determining for the dynamic process by which distress and resilience are shaped in the face of challenges (Hobfoll, 2002).

Resource-theories therefore inherently incorporate a focus on distress and resilience. Psychosocial distress is conceptualized as a reaction to a condition in which one encounters considerable challenges that are likely to threaten the extant resources, actually affect these resources or prevent resource gain relative to the resource investments one made (Hobfoll, 1989). Hence, distress is likely to ensue in cases of imbalance between the encountered demands and the abilities to deal with it and offset resource loss (Miller & Rasco, 2004). In such cases, the available resources are defied or exceeded by the challenges (Hobfoll, 1989). Resources refer to a multiplicity of factors with a resourceful nature, that may be situated on the individual, social, and cultural level, and include tangible and intangible resources (Hobfoll, 1989).

Resources are thus the building blocks that help one to meet the demands brought forth by challenges (Hobfoll, 2002). When such resources are sufficient to 'fit' with the demands, the challenge can be dealt with and resilience is fostered (Hobfoll, 1988). For this reason, people have the natural propensity to strive to obtain and retain those things they value and therefore make active attempts to acquire and preserve resources (Hobfoll, 1988, 1989, 1999). The success of these attempts is enhanced if they are environmentally scaffolded, meaning that various informal and formal agents in this environment invest communal resources in service of people's well-being and act as a vehicle to obtain such resources (Hobfoll et al., 2009). Resource-based theories have strongly emphasized this important interplay between individual and social resources, and stated that people's well-being is largely dependent on their access to resources within their social ecology (Hobfoll, 2002; Kelly, 1966; Sarason, 1974). This implies a conceptualization of resilience that reaches beyond the individual level. Hence, psychosocial resilience within this theoretical framework is defined in terms of a reservoir of resources at different social and ecological levels that can enhance psychosocial well-being, and thereby enable people to maintain or regain well-being despite confrontation with considerable challenges (Hobfoll et al., 2009).

From this framework, massive war casualties, such as child soldiering, are regarded as severely impinging on the resource reservoirs of settings and often leading to massive loss of resources in a community and wider society (Gunnar, 2006; Hobfoll et al., 2009; Masten, 2007). Besides, life changes,

such as the transition from military to civilian life, are potentially challenging, as former child soldiers may be forced to confront pervasive loss and demands caused by child soldiering. Moreover, transition involves challenging change and requires an investment of resources to readily adapt to such change (Felner et al., 1983).

While the existence of transculturally valued resources is not renounced, resources are explicitly socio-culturally framed, meaning that what is valued is generally shared by people who also share the same culture (Hobfoll, 2001). Research that draws on this theoretical framework should therefore conduct culturally sensitive assessments of the challenges and resources and of the trajectories towards resilience (cf. culturally sensitive approach). Additionally, working from an Integrated Resource Model, that emphasizes a broad spectrum of resources rather than focusing on specific resources or aspects of well-being, stimulates comprehensive studies that cover multiple life domains and levels that may influence well-being (cf. integrative approach). This theoretical background is apparent in the comprehensive assessment of experienced challenges (chapter 4) and resources (chapter 5) for former child soldiers, the study of the meaning they assign to what is valued as resources (chapter 6), the analysis of how resources and challenges shape the trajectories towards resilience (chapter 7) and the exploration of their perspectives on valuable support for their resources (chapter 8).

1.8 Study design

1.8.1 Setting

The study is carried out in northern Uganda, and the greater part of it is focused in Lira district.

Uganda is located in the Great Lakes Region of Africa, together with its neighbouring countries Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The northern part of the country has, for more than two decades, been the epicentre of a brutal armed conflict, in which the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) played a pivotal role. This conflict is politically complex given its far-reaching historical roots, erratic course, involvement of various actors, and different episodes over time (International Crisis Group, 2004). While it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to elaborately discuss the roots and course of this conflict, some important features of the conflict are provided to frame the study. It should

be noted that, despite efforts to depict the conflict in its complexity, this unavoidably implies the risk of a too simplistic portrayal.

The history of the conflict reaches back to the colonial era, when the British colonizers installed a divisive governance policy whereby certain indigenous kingdoms and chieftaincies were privileged over others (Lwanga-Lunyiigo, 1989). One of the internal policies was that the national military was dominated by people from the Acholi and Langi in northern Uganda (Finnström, 2008). After obtaining independence in 1962, the Ugandan leadership continued largely the same configuration and policies, which further divided the Ugandan population and defined the social structure of the country (Finnström, 2008; Quinn, 2004). Regional divides and tensions culminated into a series of insurgencies and coups, successively led by the later presidents Idi Amin Dada, Apollo Milton Obote, Tito Okello Lutwa, and Yoweri Kaguta Museveni (Lwanga-Lunyiigo, 1989).

When Uganda's current president Yoweri Museveni and his National Resistance Army/Movement (NRA/M) seized power in 1986, the remnants of Obote's (belonging to the Langi) and Okello's (belonging to the Acholi) armies shifted to the north of the country and splintered into multiple opposing factions (Allen, 2006; Bond & Vincent, 2002). The national NRM-army, later renamed the Ugandan People's Defence Force (UPDF), followed these factions northwards and allegedly plundered and devastated the northern area, which in due course led to broad support for the armed resistance among northern Ugandan civilians (Finnström, 2008; Ocan, 2009). The most crucial of the resistance leaders undoubtedly was Joseph Kony, who in 1987 founded a rebel movement that emerged from an earlier popular Holy Spirit Movement led by Alice Lakwena, and later became known as the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) (Allen, 2006; Finnström, 2008).

The LRA's purported main objective was to advocate for the political inclusion of the Acholi people, by overthrowing the government and establishing a state based on the biblical Ten Commandments (Ocan, 2009). The LRA could count on the initial support of many northerners who were dissatisfied with their situation, as well as on overt support from the northern Sudanese government and its allies in retaliation for Uganda's official support of the southern Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) (Allen, 2006; Finnström, 2003; Quinn, 2004). Over time, various evolutions in the conflict made the LRA become deeply entangled in a larger regional conflict that involved northern and southern Sudan and later also the Democratic Republic of Congo, which allowed the LRA to establish its bases in these countries close to the Ugandan borders (Finnström, 2008; Ocan,

2009). During more than two decades, the LRA carried out myriad war atrocities on Ugandan territory (Allen, 2006).

The LRA extensively targeted civilians, for a twofold strategic purpose. First, targeting civilians worked to weaken the power of the enemy by threatening their support network. Second, civilians were targeted to pursue compliance, which was required to secure the provision of supplies, protection and recruits (Vargas, 2009). However, by implementing extremely violent war strategies that deliberately targeted civilians and inflicted formidable harm on northern Uganda, the people's support for the LRA diminished markedly, which led to a depletion of its ranks (Finnström, 2008). This increasingly drove the LRA into forced recruitment strategies, of which its most notorious is the abduction of children. It is estimated that between 25,000 and 38,000 northern Ugandan minors have been recruited as child soldiers by the LRA, and that the LRA ranks are for 80% filled with children (Annan et al., 2006; Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2008; McKay & Mazurana, 2004; Pham, Vinck, & Stover, 2008).

The reign of terror that was exerted by the LRA left tens of thousands of Ugandan people killed, maimed, displaced, and deprived from basic requirements and human rights (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2008; International Crisis Group, 2004). Child soldiers became victims, witnesses and (forced) perpetrators of these atrocities, often inflicted on their own villages, schools or families. In order to escape this horrendous fate, families were massively evacuated into Internally Displaced Persons Camps, and many children commuted daily to trading centres and towns in hopes of finding protection against atrocities and recruitment by the LRA (Veale & Stavrou, 2003).

Although the epicentre of the conflict has mainly been located in the Acholi districts Gulu, Kitgum and Pader, Lira district was also a site of systematic abductions of children by the LRA, following the expansion of the war into the northeast (Finnström, 2003). Lira district is situated in the central north of Uganda and is part of the wider Lango subregion that also covers the neighbouring districts that are home to Langi people. The Langi belong to the wider group of the Nilotics, called the 'Luo', and speak the Western Nilotic language 'Lango' (Gilley, 2004). Notwithstanding its central involvement in the armed conflict, Lira district received far less attention and support compared to the Acholi districts.

Uganda has – in contrast to some other countries in situation of armed conflict that involves children – not implemented a national, formal DDR-program, which stands for the systematic Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration of soldiers (United Nations, 2006). In early 2000, the Ugandan

Parliament established the Amnesty Act as a temporary measure to allow LRA combatants who renounce war to be pardoned and exempted from criminal prosecution or any other form of judicial punishment (Finnström, 2008). Besides, several Interim Care Centres (in Uganda termed 'reception centres') were established as a temporarily, gradual transit zone from life in captivity to life in the community, to facilitate rehabilitation, reunification and reintegration of former soldiers (Allen & Schomerus, 2006; Coppens, Vindevogel, Derluyn, Loots, & Broekaert, 2012). Over the years, many other non-governmental and community-based organizations were founded to support formerly recruited youth and other war-affected people in northern Uganda, as was observed in our own research (Coppens et al., 2012).

From the early 1990s onwards, a multitude of peace talks – with varying degrees of success – were organized between the Ugandan government and LRA representatives, to negotiate a peaceful resolution of the conflict (Allen, 2006). In 2002, the Ugandan government also launched a massive military offensive, 'Operation Iron Fist'. However, these initiatives often resulted in new waves of LRA attacks on northern Ugandan civilians, typified by unprecedented levels of violence, including various vengeful massacres and massive abductions of children (Allen, 2006; Veale & Stavrou, 2003). Hence, a notable intensification of the conflict took place during 2002-2006. In the process of alternating peace talks and military operations, president Museveni lobbied the International Criminal Court to investigate the insurgency and issue arrest warrants for five alleged top commanders of the LRA, which occurred in 2005 (Allen, 2006). Following another negotiation between the Ugandan government and the LRA in 2006, a formal ceasefire – enshrined in the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement – was eventually obtained. Nonetheless, the LRA has hitherto refused to sign a final peace agreement (Ocan, 2009).

While the rates of rebellion and abductions of children in northern Uganda have dropped significantly in the wake of the cessation of hostilities agreement, the LRA insurgency has focused its attention on the neighbouring countries, where child soldiering remains a pressing issue. Abductions of children by the LRA continue to take place on a daily basis in Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan and Central African Republic (Human Rights Watch, 2009, 2011). Uganda still bears the deep marks of the conflict and is currently in transition after decades of violence, working towards sustainable peace. Many Ugandan civilians experience their current situation as a state of neither peace nor war, given that the conflict has not yet been officially resolved and that the LRA continues the pursuit of its cause across the border, despite international efforts to eradicate the insurgency (Allen, 2006; Beneduce et al., 2006).

1.8.2 Methodology

This research applies a mixed-methods design, of which the constitution is determined on the basis of the research questions and purposes as well as of the underlying theoretical frameworks. The research is subdivided into four studies.

1.8.2.1 Study 1

The first study intends to document the scope and nature of war-related experiences and to identify factors associated with differential exposure to warfare during child soldiering in northern Uganda (research question 1). A profile is created for former child soldiers, documenting their exposure to warfare upon departing the armed faction. For this purpose, cooperation with several northern Ugandan residential centres for former child soldiers is established in order to study archives which comprised intake data of 8,790 former child soldiers. Given the variability of the datasets, the study mainly draws on the intake data of 1,995 young people who stayed at the Rachele Rehabilitation Centre in the period 2003-2006. This database includes information on former child soldiers' socio-demographic background, abduction, experiences in captivity of the LRA, and return. Quantitative analysis is then conducted to document the socio-demographic background and the war-related experiences of northern Ugandan former child soldiers, thereby exploring whether differential experience of these war-related adversities is associated with certain child soldiering-related variables, such as location or duration of child soldiering (chapter 2).

1.8.2.2 Study 2

A second study aims to create a profile of the longer term psychosocial well-being of former child soldiers, and to preliminarily explore what kind of factors – both child-soldiering related and post-child soldiering variables – yield influence on the presence of symptoms over time (research question 2). For this purpose, cooperation with the former Rachele Rehabilitation Centre for former child soldiers in northern Uganda is established, to study its follow-up database. This database consists of information on socio-demographic background, psychological well-being, stigmatization and other living conditions of 424 former child soldiers. Firstly, the longer-term prevalence and evolutions in prevalence of repeatedly assessed psychological symptoms is determined. Secondly, potential associations of both child-soldiering related and post-child soldiering variables with longer term psychological symptoms are explored to enhance the knowledge of

which factors are associated with the prevalence of psychosocial distress over time (chapter 3).

1.8.2.3 Study 3

A third study aims to assess the challenges (research question 3) and resources (research question 4) that are experienced, and the support that is desired (research question 7) by northern Ugandan youth, including both formerly recruited and non-recruited youngsters. A stratified randomized sample of approximately 1,008 young people aged 12-25 years, many of whom (1/3) have been recruited by the LRA, is created through selecting a mixture of in- and out-of-school participants residing in urban, peri-urban and rural settings in Lira district. The participants are first given a free-listing task, asking them to list the salient things that make them unhappy and that help them, respectively. Participants are also asked to report what they feel different agents, representing both informal and formal support systems, can do to support returning former child soldiers. The listed items are then categorized according to their (in)similarity, so as to create broader domains of challenges and resources. Statistical analysis is conducted to explore the salient challenges (chapter 4) and resources (chapter 5) among the participants and potential differences between former child soldiers and their non-conscripted counterparts (chapter 4 & 5). Lastly, statistical analysis is carried out to explore clusters, similarities and variations in reported support across the different support systems, hereby comparing the perspectives of formerly recruited and non-recruited participants (chapter 8).

1.8.2.4 Study 4

A fourth study is intended to delineate the meaning of phenomena considered as resources (research question 5) and to understand how resources interplay with challenges and thereby shape the transition trajectories (research question 6). For this purpose, a subset of 48 former child soldiers is selected from the stratified random sample generated for study 3, including a male and female participant of every stratum (i.e. class, village). Individual in-depth interviews, including aspects of the Life-line Interview Method and the Retrospective Interview Technique, are conducted to inquire which challenges were met by the participants as well as how resources have been supportive during the course of transition from military to civilian life. In order to address the first aim of the fourth study (research question 5), qualitative analysis using the 'phenomenological hermeneutical method for researching lived experience' is applied to all the

interviews, to study the meaning of resources as assigned by the participants (chapter 6). Besides, with regard to the second aim of this fourth study (research question 6), qualitative analysis based on the 'ideographic case-study approach to interpretative-phenomenological analysis' is carried out on four case studies, to study the transition trajectories and the dynamic interplay between challenges and resources (chapter 7).

1.8.3 Ethics

The overall research design is approved by the Ethical Committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of Ghent University. Several precautions are taken to protect the participants' integrity and rights and to avoid placing them at significant mental or physical risk, in maximum compliance with the Ethics Code of General Principles and Ethical Standards of the American Psychological Association (2010).

Firstly, in order to insure the prospective participants' freedom of inquiry, expression and self-determination in research, and to stimulate their informed judgements and choices regarding participation in this research, much attention goes out to the informed consent procedure (American Psychological Association, 2010). While 'informed consent' is in many studies equalled and thereby reduced to obtaining a signature on a research document (Collogan, Tuma, Dolan-Sewell, Borja, & Fleishman, 2004), this eventual result is in this research essentially embedded in a broader process that is concerned with assuring the conditions that are necessary to allow prospective participants to make an informed decision about their refusal or consent to participate. For the studies of this dissertation that are based on a secondary anonymous data source, the general requirements for obtaining informed assent/consent for secondary use are typically waived. For those studies that create a new data source, the data collection is always preceded by the dispersion of information required to make an informed decision to proceed or to refuse participation, and by the opportunity for the prospective participants to ask questions about the research. Hence, the prospective participants are informed about 1) the purpose, procedure and expected duration of the research, 2) the equal possibilities to decline participation or later withdraw from participation, 3) the foreseen consequences of participation and refusal or withdrawal, 4) reasonable motives for participating or refusing participation, 5) the prospective research benefits for the participants and wider benefits for the praxis, 6) the precautions taken to assure confidentiality and the possible limitations of confidentiality, 7) the foreseen incentives or direct compensation for

participation in the research, 8) the contact information of the research team to obtain further details about the research or research findings, and 9) the availability of psychosocial support offered by various centres during or subsequently to the participation in the research (American Psychological Association, 2010).

After the provision of this information, the understanding of this information by the prospective participants is scrutinized on a case-by-case basis before actually proceeding with the data collection. Subsequently, the written informed consent is sought of those that decided to participate. For the participants who are legally incapable of giving consent due to their age (minor 18's), written informed assent is sought (American Psychological Association, 2010). Because of the immense displacement and loss of lives during the war, it is plausible that the participants are not necessarily living in the presence of the primary caregivers (legally authorized representatives). A range of practical constraints, including separated living of participants and their legally authorized representatives and the possible remote residence of these representatives combined with the restricted means to travel, thus may form an obstacle in seeking the consent of the legally authorized persons. In such cases, meticulous attention is paid to the participants' decision-making capacity and their ability to provide meaningful and voluntary assent (Collogan et al., 2004). Moreover, the appropriate permission to participate is sought from adult representatives in the research settings, such as the local council leaders or school principals. Besides, the participants' verbal permission is sought to record the voices of those participating in the interviews (American Psychological Association, 2010).

The entire research process strongly enshrines the participants' rights to privacy and confidentiality. Precautions are taken to protect the confidential information that is stored in any medium, by storing the original records in a locked bookcase and using codes instead of personal identifiers in the database (American Psychological Association, 2010). The participants are informed about the foreseeable uses of the information generated through this research, which implies that they are told that the personal identifiers will not be revealed but that the content of the information they provided will be published and broadly disseminated. Moreover, in order to safeguard the well-being and safety of the formerly recruited participants in this study, all efforts are oriented to prevent public identification of those participants who were formerly recruited. It is documented in the concerned scientific literature that the former child soldier status may be associated with negative social attitudes and that many formerly recruited young people therefore chose to conceal their past experiences to other

people. For this reason, a general population of young people is invited to participate in the research, and to report individually on paper whether they have been formerly recruited by the LRA and whether they are willing to participate in further research on their experiences of transition. This allows the discrete selection of former child soldiers for the subsequent research phases, without endangering these formerly recruited participants or revealing their past after all their efforts to secrecy.

Next, the professional position of the researcher is extensively expounded to avoid confusion about the purpose of the research and role of the researcher, whereby the possibilities and limitations of the research(er) are clearly demarcated to facilitate realistic expectations about the research participation and avoid the misconception of this research as a therapeutic intervention (Appelbaum, Roth, Lidz, Benson & Winslade, 1987). The research team estimates that participants might have the expectation that their participation will be rewarded in the form of immediate financial or material benefits, given the history of years of international humanitarian assistance in the area. The possibilities and limitations of the research are therefore extensively elucidated prior to the data collection. While the participation in this research may in one way or another be beneficial for the participants and bring forth personal gains, the participants are informed that there are no intended direct individual benefits and that the indirect potential benefits are unknown. It is clarified what this research pursues and intends to contribute to in the longer term, but it is honestly notified that the eventual success and attainment of these research aims is uncertain (Collogan et al., 2004). Moreover, it is made clear that offering inducements falls beyond the capacities of this research, so that no financial or other compensations are offered for participation. This is in line with the ethical guidelines on inducements for research participation, to avoid biased consent or coerced participation (American Psychological Association, 2010).

On the other hand, the professional services that are offered during or after participation in this research are well clarified. Since there is foreknowledge about potential psychosocial distress in the participants of this study and it is estimated that the research implies a risk of interfering with this distress, precautions are taken to minimize psychological strain during and after this research. Given the documented risks involved in disaster-oriented research (Newman & Kaloupek, 2004), the studies of this dissertation that cover this research topic are based on existing data sources that have been collected by former Interim Care Centres for the sake of providing appropriate psychosocial support. The studies of this dissertation that aim to create a new data source are designed to not explicitly elicit child soldiering-related

information and experiences, but to focus on the post-child soldiering experiences. Notwithstanding, it is taken into account that such research might also induce psychological distress or elicit distress that was caused by an antecedent event (Collogan et al., 2004). For this reason, further precautions are taken with regard to the psychosocial support of the participants.

When psychosocial support for participants is indicated and no appropriate services are available, the researcher can provide psychological first aid based on prior training and experience to ensure that such support is not denied to the participants (American Psychological Association, 2010; World Health Organization, 2011). However, given the limitations associated with the research position, cooperation with local professionals and institutions that provide psychosocial support is established prior to the data collection procedure, to foresee a triage system for those participants in need of more psychosocial support and to allow referral of cases that exceed the possibilities of the researcher (American Psychological Association, 2010). These local partners have over the years developed expertise with regard to the psychological counselling in post-conflict zones and may offer relatively prolonged support to the participants after the data collection procedure is terminated. Furthermore, alongside this research project, which is embedded in a larger research centre called 'Centre for Children in Vulnerable Situations', a psychosocial support centre is developed in northern Uganda. This centre centrally aims to promote the psychosocial well-being of young people living in this area and more specifically to provide psychosocial support to the participants of this research, their caretakers and social environment. The establishment of this centre can therefore be considered as an ethical measure to meet the plausible psychological distress of the participants in this study. Hence, all participants of the research are prior to the data collection informed about the possibility to receive psychosocial support during or subsequent to the research participation. It is clarified that this support may be provided by the social workers of the Centre for Children in Vulnerable Situations or the staff of the partner organizations in the field. The researcher informs the participants about their option to use these services and more specifically recommends the services that are deemed to serve their best interest (Collogan et al., 2004). Those participants who report or show severe symptoms of psychological distress, including suicidal ideation, are after their participation explicitly proposed to be further followed up by the centre or be referred to a specialized partner organization. In case they assent, they can timely receive the required psychosocial assistance. This implies that the participants themselves eventually decide whether or not

they make use of the proposed psychological follow-up support (Collogan et al., 2004).

The genuine respect for the diversity and uniqueness of people engenders efforts to reduce biases based on gender identity, ethnicity, culture, religion, and language among other factors (American Psychological Association, 2010). For this reason, close cooperation is established with local research assistants, who fulfil a consultative and supervising role towards the research design. A multiple days training is organized to create the opportunity for dialogue, to discuss and jointly fine-tune the research design so as to adjust it to the characteristics of the concrete research setting. The local research team is extensively informed about the purpose and procedure of the study, and prescriptions are created to insure clarity about their role in the research process and consistency in the translation procedures of this research. Furthermore, the design of the methodology is carefully considered by the bicultural research team in the light of the research setting, whereby the necessary adjustments are made to insure the comprehensibility and relevance of the research methods for the local context, and to enhance the methods' capacity to capture culturally sensitive data. Since the local researchers have been trained in humanities and have previous experience with social work, information is exchanged about the considered 'do's and don'ts' in research on a possible sensitive research topic, as well as about the conceptualization, recognition and response to plausibly encountered psychosocial distress in the prospective participants of this research (Collogan et al., 2004). Another measure to enhance the cultural sensitivity of this research is that the communication with the participants occurs either in English or the local language Lango, according to the individual language preference and competence. This promotes information in a language that is reasonably understandable to the participants of the study (American Psychological Association, 2010) and invites the participants to express themselves in the language they feel most comfortable with. Throughout the entire research process, the bicultural research team serves many valued ends. It facilitates awareness of the researchers' social identities as an inevitable influence on the study design and its findings, which is intentionally preserved through continuous reflexive analysis within this research team. Moreover, the interpretation of the research data occurs in close cooperation between the members of the bicultural research team, in order to cross-check the appropriateness and meaningfulness of the research for the local research setting.

Further, important steps are taken to facilitate a timely feedback process for the participants (American Psychological Association, 2010). During the entire research process, participants are given the opportunity to contact

the researcher or the local research team members to obtain additional information about the research procedure, the research results and conclusions. Additional measures are foreseen to actively debrief the participants of this study when research findings are available. The finalization of each study of this dissertation is followed by national workshops in Uganda. Workshops are organized in the north of the country to include the participants and stakeholders who are active in the area and participated in this research, and in the capital city of the country to broadly disseminate the research findings to other important stakeholders on a national level. This dissemination occurs by making the findings accessible and useful for field workers, organizations and policy makers active in the concerned area. The benefits of these workshops are twofold. In the first place, by feeding the research findings back to practice, stakeholders are encouraged and informed on how to develop evidence-based practice, which might be considered as an ethical imperative (Wessells, 2008). Secondly, by gaining the stakeholders' feedback on the research findings, the research can further develop in a practice-based and practice-oriented way. The feedback procedure for the participating young people is further shaped by the organization of a large-scale feedback project after this dissertation is completed, whereby the young people who previously participated in this research are assembled per research setting and focus group discussions are organized on the basis of the main research findings. This enables timely and extensive debriefing of the participants about the research findings (American Psychological Association, 2010). Besides, these focus group discussions allow to test the accuracy of the research findings and elicit the participants' perspectives about the concrete meaningfulness and implications of these findings for their daily lives.

More concrete ethical precautions per study are outlined in each of the following chapters.

1.8.4 Overview chapters

Chapter 2 reports the first study on the experiences of former child soldiers during their time of forced conscription with the LRA in northern Uganda. This chapter aims to document the scope and the nature of the war-related experiences and the systematic abuse of child soldiers.
Chapter 3 addresses the question as to which child soldiering-related and/or post-child soldiering factors are associated with the longer term psychosocial well-being of former child soldiers, as is examined in the second study.

Chapter 4 describes the first part of the third study that aimed to assess the scope and salience of challenges encountered by former child soldiers and to determine additional challenges they face compared to non-recruited young people in war-affected northern Uganda.
Chapter 5 reports the second part of the third study that explored resources that help former child soldiers in dealing with war-related adversity and its subsequent challenges, thereby examining similarities and differences in resources of formerly recruited and non-recruited youth.
Chapter 6 reports the first part of the fourth study that addresses the question why the identified resources are helpful for former child soldiers, and thereby offers an insight into the underlying fourfold meaning of resources for former child soldiers' transition from military to civilian life.
Chapter 7 describes the second part of the fourth study that explored the dynamic interplay between challenges and resources in the transition of former child soldiers, and how their balance contributes to the course of their transition trajectory.
Chapter 8 presents the third part of the third study that aimed to evaluate the potential contribution of informal community initiatives and formal interventions in support of former child soldiers. This was explored from the perspectives of both formerly recruited and non-recruited youth.

This dissertation is a compilation of several manuscripts that have been submitted for publication, are under editorial review, or have already been published elsewhere. To make each of these manuscripts self-containing, the content of these chapters may overlap.

Box 1: Study design

STUDY 1	**Research Question 1**: What are the past war-related experiences of former child soldiers? ***(chapter 2)***
STUDY 2	**Research Question 2**: Which child soldiering-related and post-child soldiering factors are associated with the longer term psychosocial well-being of former child soldiers? ***(chapter 3)***
STUDY 3	**Research Question 3**: What are the present challenges former child soldiers encounter, and do these differ from their non-recruited counterparts? ***(chapter 4)*** **Research Question 4**: What are resources that help former child soldiers to deal with challenges, and do these differ from their non-recruited counterparts? ***(chapter 5)*** **Research Question 7**: How can informal and formal support systems contribute to the resources of former child soldiers? ***(chapter 8)***
STUDY 4	**Research Question 5**: What is the underlying meaning of resources that are valued in dealing with the challenges encountered in the transition from the military to society? ***(chapter 6)*** **Research Question 6**: How do challenges and resources interact and shape the transition trajectories of former child soldiers? ***(chapter 7)***

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2

Forced conscription of children during armed conflict: experiences of former child soldiers in northern Uganda*

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THE CHILD SOLDIER | Betty Ejang

The load on my head,
The rashes in my skin
The soreness on my feet,
The pang of hunger inside,
The despair of being alone.

Around me is a river of blood.
A mess of flesh,
The dying groans of fellow children
That my hands have hacked.

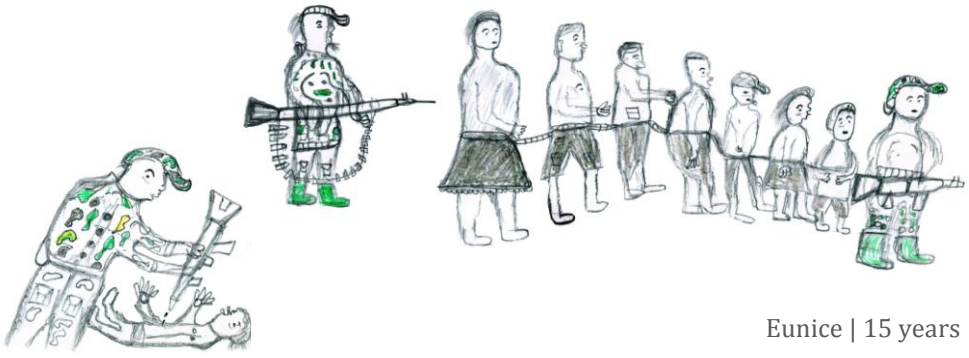
The unshakeable deep-seated guilt inside me,
Life is but an everlasting nightmare,
I have no future to look forward to.
The soldiers regard me as a spy,
The rebels as a betrayer.

My hope; this line between life and death,
My ambition is but a moment's fantasy.

God!

I have deprived the beasts of their residence,
Saved and destroyed their food,
Yet I'm more or less one of them,
With no shoulder to cry on,
And no laughter to share.

Pain at sunrise, regrets at sunset,
Dawn or dusk,
Life is not fair anymore.



Eunice | 15 years

Abstract

Child soldiering can be considered as one of the worst practices of institutionalized child abuse. However, little is known about the scope and nature of this abuse and the consequent experiences of children enrolled in an armed faction. This research aims at enriching the knowledge on the experiences of child soldiers in the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in northern Uganda.

The databases of 4 former Interim Care Centres for returned child soldiers in northern Uganda, comprising socio-demographic information of 8,790 returnees, and additional data from the Rachele Rehabilitation Centre on war-related experiences of 1,995 former child soldiers, are analyzed using descriptive statistics, analysis of covariance and regression analysis.

During on average one and a half years in captivity, nearly all participants had various war-related experiences, whereby 88% witnessed and 76% forcibly participated in atrocities. Variations in exposure to warfare appear to be mainly associated with age of abduction, duration of captivity, location of captivity, being military trained, and being a rebel's wife.

These findings testify to the vastness of abuse lived through by the child soldiers in this study. They fulfilled a multifaceted position in the LRA, which delivers a range of potential direct and indirect consequences. The variables decisive in differential experiences unveil trends in the strategic abduction by the LRA and in differential exposure to warfare among child soldiers.

The variation in exposure to warfare urges for an individualized approach and monitoring of returning child soldiers. In order to address the potential indirect impact of child soldiering, support also needs to be oriented towards the child's network, based on a socio-ecological approach.

2.1 Introduction

Contemporary wars are increasingly fought within state borders, placing civilians more and more in the centre of the battlefield, and are marked by strategies targeting civilians, resulting in numerous civil casualties and devastating consequences on societal life (Barenbaum, Ruchkin & Schwab-Stone, 2004; Beneduce, Jourdan, Raeymaekers & Vlassenroot, 2006; Betancourt & Khan, 2008; Goodhand & Hulme, 1999; Williams, 2007). Children (under-eighteens), considered as the most vulnerable, become inevitably involved in these civil wars (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2008a; Wessells, 2009; Williams, 2007). Not only are they exposed to and affected by war as civilians, many children also actively participate in the conflict as child soldier (Pedersen & Sommerfelt, 2007). Despite the signing, ratifying or acceding of the "Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict" (UN General Assembly, 2000) by three quarters of all countries, it is estimated that worldwide about 300,000 children continue to be involved in armed factions (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2008a), rendering child soldiering one of the worst forms of institutionalized child abuse (Kimmel & Roby, 2007).

In Uganda, a complex armed conflict - often referred to as the biggest forgotten, neglected humanitarian emergency in the world (Agence France Presse, 2003; International Crisis Group, 2004) - has been waging for more than two decades, in which the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) plays a paramount role (Allen, 2006). The LRA has kept the northern districts under a reign of terror by applying various civilian targeting strategies, with the violent abduction and forced recruitment of minors to serve as child soldiers being one of its most notorious. Numbers of abductions vary largely due to precarious registration, though it is estimated that hitherto at least 25,000 up to 38,000 children have been forcibly involved as child soldiers in the LRA (Annan, Blattman & Horton, 2006; Coalition To Stop The Use of Child Soldiers, 2008a; Human Rights Watch, 2006; Pham, Vinck & Stover, 2008). However, this is probably an underestimation, as one third of the males and one sixth of the females involved in the Survey of War-Affected Youth (SWAY), conducted in 2006, reported to have been abducted by the LRA for at least one day (Annan et al., 2006). In 2006, the 'Cessation of Hostilities Agreement' led to a refuge of the LRA outside Uganda and a considerable decline in children's recruitment in Uganda. However, roughly estimated 2,000 captives remain into the LRA's vicious clutches, and abductions continue to take place on a daily basis in neighbouring countries

(Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2008b; Human Rights Watch, 2009).

Although all children in war-torn areas are somehow affected, it is indubitably apparent that child soldiers have an increased likelihood of being more directly involved in the armed conflict, for they become part of a belligerent faction (Human Rights Watch, 1994). Research indeed reveals that child soldiers in northern Uganda endure a disproportionate amount of war-related experiences compared to their non-conscripted peers (Annan et al., 2006). However, little is known about the scope, nature and intensity of this exposure and involvement of child soldiers in warfare (Annan et al., 2006; Pedersen & Sommerfelt, 2007). Notwithstanding, prevailing estimations are cause for concern (Pedersen & Sommerfelt, 2007), as it is beyond doubt that this systematic child abuse and the inherent exposure to warfare may leave a pernicious impact on the well-being of former child soldiers, threatening their health and development (Wessells, 2006; Williams, 2007), as well as posing serious challenges to their social integration (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2008a). Consequently, a range of programs, including Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration programs (DDR) and Interim Care Centres (ICC), have been established in pursuit of the rehabilitation and reintegration of former child soldiers (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2008a; Rivard, 2010).

Unfortunately, such programs often consider former child soldiers as a homogeneous group with the same experiences and therefore similar needs upon return (Betancourt, 2008; Wessells, 2006). Such an approach has left many former child soldiers unacknowledged in their particular needs, and led to the evaluation of several programs as inadequate (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2008a), since meaningful psychosocial support is grounded in an appraisal of how child soldiering might have affected each particular former child soldier differently (Annan et al., 2006; Amone-P'Olak, 2008; Blattman & Annan, 2008; Wessells, 2009). Apart from information on the child's psychological, social and physical condition, as well as the range of factors potentially influencing the impact of exposure to warfare on their psychosocial well-being in the longer term (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010), variables known to unveil the scope and nature of war-related experiences and thus potential psychosocial challenges may constitute an important indication in allocating appropriate support in emergency situations, after which a more profound assessment and follow-up can occur. Consequently, it is important to discern how they were exposed to warfare, to be aware of the position they fulfilled in the conflict

and to understand how all this may potentially affect their psychological and social well-being.

By studying data on former LRA-child soldiers registered in northern Ugandan Interim Care Centres - usually termed 'reception centres' in this context -, this research aims at documenting the diverse scope and nature of war-related experiences and identifying factors associated with differential exposure to warfare during child soldiering. Notwithstanding the substantial body of articles on northern Uganda, only very few have thoroughly and systematically profiled the exposure to warfare among former child soldiers in this region. Consequently, insight into the internal structure and modus operandi of the LRA remains rather limited (Cakaj, 2010). This study therefore aims to document the extent of abuse associated with child soldiering in northern Uganda to an unprecedented level. Testing for those variables that are assumed to have influenced the scope and nature of exposure to warfare among child soldiers, may produce initial handles for identifying former child soldiers with increased likelihood to be at risk for psychological maladaptation (Hatch & Dohrenwend, 2007) and social challenges (Blattman & Annan, 2008; Wessells, 2009) upon return.

2.2 Method

2.2.1 Procedure

In this study, cooperation was established with the Rachele Rehabilitation Centre (RRC), a former reception centre in northern Uganda that was set up to receive and support former child soldiers after their return from the LRA. In addition, other northern Ugandan reception centres were invited to participate in this research, of which Gulu Support the Children Organization (GUSCO) (Gulu), Christian Counseling Fellowship (CCF) (Pader), and Kitgum Concerned Women's Association (KICWA) (Kitgum) approved by sharing their intake databases. The other reception centres in this region (Caritas, Concerned Parents Association and World Vision) either withheld their participation or did not have records available.

Based on the narratives of returning child soldiers and what they deducted as important or common topics, the various centres independently created an own checklist aimed to gather background information on the child and its war-related experiences during child soldiering. The checklist was completed during a one-to-one intake-interview, usually held within the first week after arrival at the centre. The procedure and aim of developing

the checklist generate several implications concerning the psychometric qualities of the measure (Netland, 2005). Regarding construct reliability, the checklist was not developed to study presumed latent constructs, which means that assumptions of internal consistency and attempts for statistical structure detection are out of order. Regarding construct validity, the inductive way of working guarantees that most of the contextually relevant items are included, yet exhaustiveness of the checklist cannot be assured.

The items comprise socio-demographic details of the child, information on the circumstances of abduction, on the incidence and nature of war-related experiences, on the duration and location of captivity and on the circumstances of return. Yet, due to the lack of a standardized checklist, the information common to all included former child soldiers is rather limited. Comparing across the different reception centres, both similarities and differences were registered. In addition, items were sporadically removed or added over time. Therefore, the RRC database was used as baseline. With regard to the socio-demographic background, all the common and stable variables in the various databases were aggregated and maintained for analysis. Regarding the child soldiering experiences, only the database of RRC was used, as the other databases only contained scare information on this matter. However, missing values remain due to the precarious circumstances in which these data were collected and conserved.

The approval of the Ethical Committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of Ghent University was obtained.

2.2.2 Participants

According to the Cape Town Principles and Best Practices on the Recruitment of Children into the Armed Forces and on Demobilization and Social Reintegration of Child Soldiers in Africa (Cape Town, 27-30 April 1997), a child soldier is defined as "*any person under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers and anyone accompanying such groups, other than family members. The definition includes girls recruited for sexual purposes and for forced marriage. It does not, therefore, only refer to a child who is carrying or has carried arms.*" (Unicef, 1997, p.14). Based on this definition, former child soldiers who exceeded the age of 18 years at the time of abduction were excluded, whereas no other selection criteria concerning duration of abduction or role within the LRA were applied. Children born in LRA-captivity form a segment of the former child soldiers received in reception centres, so they are

included in the aggregated database comprising socio-demographic information, yet are excluded in further analysis due to limited information on their war-related experiences. Moreover, aggregating the database and preparing it for analysis, duplicated entries were excluded. As such, the RRC-database provides information on 1,995 former child soldiers (abducted: *n*=1,830, born in captivity: *n*=165) received during its period of operation, 2003-2006. The other reception centres shared information on a total group of 6,795 former child soldiers received between 1998 and 2007.

2.2.3 Analysis

The database was analyzed using SPSS 17 and R 2.10.1. In order to gain insight in the profile of the former child soldiers received in reception centres upon return from the LRA with regard to their socio-demographic background and war-related experiences, descriptive statistics were applied. Subgroups were created based on reception centres (RRC versus other), socio-demographic variables (sex, age at abduction or age at return) and child soldiering-related variables (location of captivity, military training, and in the situations of females, whether used as rebel's wife). To test for equality of means, independent t-tests (for dichotomous variables) and one-way analysis of variance (for variables with more categories) were used. In case of contingency tables, χ^2-tests for independence were applied.

Based on the literature study, certain hypotheses concerning the differential exposure to warfare related to trends in abductions by the LRA could be delineated. On the one hand, many short term abductions occur due to release following massive abduction during raids. This selection seems to be based on the age and strength of the abductees. On the other hand, more long term abductions take place mainly for military and sexual purposes and for strengthening the scattered LRA-bases (Human Rights Watch, 2005). This led to a theory-driven motivation for the inclusion of variables containing information on the age of abduction, the duration of captivity, whether military trained, whether assigned as a wife to a rebel and the location of captivity. To be able to explore the hypothesized association of these variables with differential exposure to warfare, some raw observations needed conversion to meet the assumptions of the statistical tests.

The variable 'duration of captivity' was heavily skewed to the right. When this variable was added as dependent variable to our regression model, it can be shown that the variance varied systematically and that the error terms were not normally distributed. Because it was not clear which

transformation was optimal to guarantee the assumptions of the model, the Box-Cox procedure was used to identify the coefficient for the power transformation. According to this method, a power transformation of .3 seemed adequate for this model. When added as an independent variable, the more common log transformation was used for this variable. Furthermore, since the information on 'female: rebel's wife' is conditional to 'sex', the variable 'gender role' was constructed to capture the information of both variables, distinguishing between males, females who were and those who were not rebel's wife. Besides, a variable 'number of different war-related experiences' was calculated by counting the single occurrence of different war-related experiences, albeit not providing information on the number of times one endured a particular experience. As such a summation of single occurrence can mask differential exposure in terms of severity, frequency and duration of the experiences, it is recommended to categorize on a conceptual basis (Netland, 2005). Hence, variables indicating respectively the witnessing and perpetration of atrocities additional to being victimized as a child soldier - which has poor differentiating value - were created in order to get a notion of the way in which the former child soldier was involved in warfare.

Thus, the main variables used in the following analyses are 'age at abduction', 'location of captivity', 'military training', 'gender role', 'duration of captivity' (Box-Cox or Log-transformation), 'number of different war-related experiences', 'witnessing atrocities' and 'participating in atrocities'.

With the intention of examining the hypothesized effects of certain child soldiering-related variables (location of captivity, military training and gender role as factors; log duration of captivity and age of abduction as covariates) on the number of different war-related experiences, univariate analysis of covariance was used, fitting the main model. To further explore whether certain variables may have influenced the nature of experiences one had to endure, binary logistic regression analyses were conducted of the child soldiering-related independent variables (age at abduction, location of captivity, military training, gender role and log duration of captivity) on respectively witnessing and participating in atrocities carried out by the LRA. To examine whether age at abduction, location of captivity, military training and gender role were potentially associated with the Box-Cox duration of captivity, univariate analysis of covariance was applied, requesting all the main and two-way interactions. Given the large sample size, the significance level was set at $\alpha = .001$.

2.3 Results

2.3.1 Socio-demographic characteristics

An overview of the socio-demographic characteristics of the registered former child soldiers (table 1) is based on the sex, age at return and district of origin.

Table 1: Socio-demographic Characteristics

Variable	Total	RRC	Other	χ^2 / t
Total	8790 (100)	1995 (23)	6795 (77)	
Sex				1.72
Male	5585 (64)	1251 (63)	4334 (64)	
Female	3149 (36)	744 (37)	2405 (36)	
Age at return†	13.78 (4.39,0-30)	13.47 (4.09, 0-28)	13.87 (4.48, 0-30)	-3.50***
District of origin				2376.30***
Kitgum	2784 (32)	350 (18)	2434 (37)	
Gulu	2620 (30)	265 (13)	2355 (35)	
Pader	1990 (23)	422 (21)	1568 (24)	
Lira	695 (8)	553 (28)	142 (2)	
Other	560 (6)	388 (20)	166 (2)	
Abducted	7946 (91)	1830 (92)	6116 (90)	
Sex				1.25
Male	5166 (65)	1176 (64)	3990 (66)	
Female	2739 (35)	654 (36)	2085 (34)	
Age at return†	14.88 (2.76, 0-30)	14.35 (2.81, 2-28)	15.04 (2.72, 0-30)	-9.48***
Born in captivity	819 (9)	165 (8)	654 (10)	
Sex				2.16
Male	407 (51)	75 (45)	332 (52)	
Female	398 (49)	90 (55)	308 (48)	
Age at return†	3.07 (2.60, 0-14)	3.19 (2.55, 0-10)	3.04 (2.61, 0-14)	0.67

***n* (%); † years: *M*(*SD; range*); *** *p*≤.001**

RRC: Rachele Rehabilitation Centre ; OTHER = GUSCO: Gulu Support the Children Organization, CCF: Christian Counseling Fellowship, KICWA: Kitgum Concerned Women's Association

With regard to age at return, further analysis discloses that 75% of the total sample is aged younger than 16 years. A comparison between the RRC and the other centres shows that the distribution of sex does not significantly differ between the various centres, while the distribution of age indicates that the former child soldiers received in RRC are considerably younger. Concerning the district of origin, the distribution reveals that the RRC mainly received returnees formerly residing in Lira, while the other centres seem to cover their respective district quite equally. Besides, the table represents the distribution between children who were abducted by the LRA and children who were born in captivity of the LRA. Again this shows that among the abducted children, those received in the RRC are significantly younger than in the other centres, while no differences

concerning sex are identified. Note that the district of origin was not systematically registered for children born in captivity and is hence not displayed.

Additionally, the RRC-database further shows that 84% of the children's families (*n*=1,426) was internally displaced due to the conflict; 26% (*n*=514) lost their father, 12% (*n*=236) their mother and 6% (*n*=126) was orphaned when returning from captivity.

Based on the RRC-database, the next sections offer more comprehensive and detailed information on the war-related experiences of the abducted former LRA-child soldiers in this study.

2.3.2 Abduction

Most former child soldiers in this study were abducted at young age (*M*=13.21, *SD*=2.36, *range*=]0-18[), mainly from their homes. Half of them were abducted together with one or several relatives. The abductions were conducted violently, especially for males and older children. Not only the abductees were victimized, as many witnessed atrocities against others at the moment of abduction (table 2).

Table 2: The abduction

Variable	**Total** *n*=1,830	**Sex**			**Age at abduction†**	***F***
		Male *n=1,176*	***Female*** *n=654*	χ^2		
Location				17.37**		2.16
Home	1262 (75)	809 (75)	453 (75)		13.09 (2.31)	
On the way	206 (12)	148 (14)	58 (10)		13.48 (2.62)	
In the garden	114 (7)	76 (7)	38 (6)		13.20 (2.17)	
At school	54 (3)	23 (2)	31 (5)		13.70 (2.29)	
Other	50 (3)	29 (3)	21 (4)		12.86 (1.89)	
Moment				0.35		0.03
Night	940 (53)	601 (53)	339 (54)		13.21 (2.33)	
Day	818 (47)	534 (47)	284 (46)		13.19 (2.34)	
With family	818 (47)	523 (47)	295 (48)	0.42	13.16 (2.33)	0.26
Experienced						
Tying	1068 (62)	824 (73)	244 (40)	183.99***	13.49 (2.28)	43.63***
Beating	895 (52)	615 (55)	280 (46)	13.85***	13.39 (2.28)	12.34***
Witnessed						
Killing	293 (56)	212 (63)	81 (44)	15.96***	13.05 (2.40)	3.14
Looting	160 (30)	91 (26)	69 (38)	7.74**	12.42 (2.12)	10.32
Torturing	147 (28)	107 (31)	40 (22)	5.10*	13.07 (2.59)	1.04
Destructing	25 (5)	16 (5)	9 (5)	0.01	13.40 (2.02)	1.20

***n* (%), † *M*(*SD*), * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$**

2.3.3 Captivity

Box 1: Testimony of a former child soldier

> *"I was eleven years when I was abducted. When you reach there, first they cane you a hundred sticks, so to let you be strong hearted. Then you are given a uniform and a gun and will start training. From there, you are a soldier.*
> *I was forced to kill about twenty people. There was a girl I came with from the same village and they forced me to kill her. It was difficult for me to reject, because if you reject they will kill you. So you do that to safeguard yourself.*
> *Soon I was given to a commander. He was forty-five and he was growing white hair already. I was forced… I was not happy, but you cannot show your unhappiness on that moment.. I got pregnant when I was only fifteen years.*
> *I cannot drop the child, so I love the child but the father I don't like. My husband is still in the bush, and because I was not happy with him, I escaped."*
>
> *P., 19 years, Lira*

The former child soldiers in this study spent on average one and a half years (*M*=561.55 days, *Mdn*=285.00 days) in captivity, ranging from half a day to 6,009 days. During captivity in the LRA, the former child soldiers in this study were directly exposed to warfare, as all of them reported at least one of the 16 recorded war-related experiences. Nearly all former child soldiers declared that the living conditions in captivity were harsh and that they themselves got victimized by violence. Additionally, 88% of the sample often witnessed atrocities against other abductees, civilians or soldiers, and 76% admitted to have perpetrated atrocities, of which most were targeting civilians.

With regard to the strategic trends in recruitment, 62% of the former child soldiers in this study - mostly older males - went through a military training in which they were taught how to handle a weapon and organize an attack. Concerning females, 56% was at young age assigned to a rebel as his wife, including extensive subjection to sexual abuse (box 1). Moreover, 26% of the total group was taken to the LRA-bases in Sudan. The distribution of war-related experiences among the subgroups created on the basis of these variables is depicted in table 3.

Motivated by the group differences resulting from table 3, analysis of covariance was applied in order to explore which variables were associated with the exposure rate of child soldiers to war-related experiences (table 4). This model, explaining nearly 60% (R^2=.58, $F_{(6,1597)}$=362.60, p<.001) of the variance in number of different war-related experiences, identified significant main effects of the location of captivity, a military training, the duration of captivity, and to a lesser extent also of the age of abduction and the gender role. This implies that the estimated mean was higher for child

Table 3: War-related experiences in captivity

Variable	Total	Sex		Age at return†	Military training		Location of captivity		Females: rebel's wife	
	n=1830	***Male***	***Female***		***No***	***Yes***	***Uganda***	***Sudan***	***No***	***Yes***
		n=1176	*n=654*		*n=657*	*n=1048*	*n=1257*	*n=440*	*n=263*	*n=337*
Victimized										
Walk long distances	1733 (99)	1123 (99)	610 (98)	14.33 (2.74)	641 (98)	1039 (99)	1240 (99)	431 (99)	253 (97)	326 (99)
Hunger/thirst	1590 (97)	1048 (98)	542 (95)	14.36 (2.70)	576 (93)	988 (99)	1145 (96)	413 (98)	223 (93)	302 (96)
Torture/beating	1588 (92)	1041 (93)	547 (90)	14.36 (2.72)	556 (85)	999 (96)	1143 (92)	402 (93)	230 (88)	297 (92)
Carry heavy loads	1538 (89)	994 (89)	544 (88)	14.33 (2.66)	565 (87)	922 (89)	1112 (90)	365 (84)	236 (90)	279 (86)
Live on insects, leaves, urine	392 (88)	198 (91)	194 (85)	15.94 (3.29)	81 (77)	305 (91)	18 (43)	374 (93)	34 (74)	159 (88)
To be wounded	354 (21)	232 (22)	122 (21)	14.85 (2.76)	70 (11)	279 (28)	181 (15)	169 (40)	41 (16)	78 (25)
Sexual abuse	337 (56)	0 (0)	337 (56)	16.96 (3.43)	141 (43)	182 (71)	137 (38)	185 (84)	0 (0)	337 (100)
Witnessed	1525 (88)	988 (88)	537 (88)	14.39 (2.77)	470 (72)	1,019 (98)	1,049 (84)	434 (99)	203 (78)	314 (95)
Captives die of starvation	320 (89)	158 (88)	162 (91)	15.96 (3.45)	54 (81)	262 (92)	9 (47)	311 (92)	27 (84)	134 (92)
Killing of people	1450 (86)	938 (86)	512 (85)	14.41 (2.78)	429 (69)	990 (95)	990 (82)	419 (96)	189 (75)	305 (94)
Other captives forced to kill	1284 (77)	831 (77)	453 (77)	14.48 (2.82)	350 (55)	915 (90)	869 (72)	392 (92)	165 (66)	275 (86)
Captives killed during fights	613 (66)	429 (72)	184 (54)	14.48 (2.65)	123 (37)	481 (82)	412 (61)	196 (80)	59 (44)	118 (61)
Perpetrated	1316 (76)	886 (79)	430 (71)	14.52 (2.68)	349 (54)	942 (90)	875 (70)	408 (93)	148 (57)	269 (82)
Looting	1137 (67)	764 (69)	373 (62)	14.67 (2.64)	269 (41)	850 (83)	729 (59)	383 (88)	130 (50)	233 (72)
Killing	803 (47)	560 (51)	243 (41)	14.58 (2.72)	159 (25)	628 (61)	503 (41)	281 (65)	70 (28)	164 (51)
Abducting	651 (39)	454 (42)	197 (33)	14.86 (2.59)	102 (16)	538 (53)	399 (33)	237 (56)	63 (24)	126 (4)
Fighting	448 (27)	310 (29)	138 (23)	15.41 (2.80)	44 (7)	401 (39)	157 (13)	286 (66)	25 (10)	111 (35)
Destructing	400 (24)	256 (24)	144 (25)	15.22 (2.95)	63 (10)	335 (33)	211 (17)	181 (43)	35 (14)	105 (33)
Number of different war-related experiences†	8.26 (3.13, 1-16)	8.20 (2.98)	8.38 (3.38)	N.A.	6.43 (2.46)	9.65 (2.69)	7.36 (2.46)	11.42 (2.45)	6.77 (2.67)	9.94 (3.08)
Duration of Captivity†	561.55 (818.54, 0.5-6009)	372.42 (459.34)	898.79 (1145.57)	N.A.	319.90 (564.81)	722.81 (899.80)	269.07 (278.78)	1430.36 (1152.04)	299.36 (314.85)	1434.04 (1322.48)

***n* (%), † *M*(*SD, range*); N.A.: Not Applicable**

soldiers who stayed in Sudan and also for military-trained child soldiers. The effect of 'gender role' could mainly be attributed to a higher estimated mean for rebel's wives in contrast to other females and men. Further, the older that children were when abducted or the longer their duration of captivity, the more different war-related experiences could be expected.

Table 4: Ancova of number of different war-related experiences

Parameter	Sum of Squares	*df*	*F*	*β*	*SE*	*t*
Intercept	503.63	1	129.33 ***	7.46	0.49	15.26 ***
Duration of captivity *(log)*	674.89	1	173.31 ***	0.51	0.04	13.17 ***
Age at abduction	73.18	1	18.79 ***	0.10	0.02	4.34 ***
Gender role *(rebel's wife†)*	96.36	2	12.37 ***			
Female no rebel's wife				-0.86	0.18	-4.67 ***
Male				-0.61	0.15	-4.21 ***
Military training *(yes†)*	1055.52	1	271.06 ***			
No				-199	0.02	-16.46 ***
Location of captivity *(Sudan†)*	1244.14	1	319.50 ***			
Uganda				-2.42	0.14	-17.87 ***

R^2= .58; † reference category; *** $p \leq .001$

Table 5: Binary logistic regression of witnessing and perpetrating atrocities

Parameter	*β*	Standard Error	Wald χ^2	*df*	Exp(*β*)
Witness atrocities (overall success rate: 89%,$p \leq .001$)					
Age at abduction	-0.53	0.04	1.73	1	0.95
Duration of captivity *(log)*	0.47	0.06	71.97 ***	1	1.61
Gender role *(man†)*					
Female no rebel's wife	-0.13	0.22	0.37	1	0.88
Female rebel's wife	0.68	0.33	4.20 *	1	1.96
Military training *(no†)*					
Yes	1.98	0.25	65.09 ***	1	7.25
Location of captivity *(Uganda†)*					
Sudan	0.98	0.49	4.04 *	1	2.56
Perpetrate atrocities (overall success rate: 81%,$p \leq .001$)					
Age at abduction	0.09	0.032	7.97 **	1	1.09
Duration of captivity *(log)*	0.45	0.052	77.68 **	1	1.09
Gender role: *(man†)*					
Female no rebel's wife	-0.44	0.18	5.96 *	1	0.64
Female rebel's wife	-0.34	0.21	2.57	1	0.72
Military training *(no†)*					
Yes	1.35	0.15	76.10 ***	1	3.85
Location of captivity *(Uganda†)*					
Uganda	0.80	0.24	10.86 ***	1	2.23

† reference category; * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$

In order to examine the influence of these potential predictors on the likelihood of witnessing and perpetrating atrocities, binary logistic regression analysis were conducted (table 5). The first model examining potential predictors of witnessing atrocities ($\chi^2_{(6)}$=391.69, p<.001) identified the variables duration of captivity and military training to have significant

partial effects. This implies that for each one-unit increase in duration of captivity, the odds of witnessing atrocities increased by half. The odds for military training indicate that former child soldiers who were military trained were about seven times more likely to witness atrocities. The second model examining potential predictors of perpetrating atrocities ($\chi^2_{(6)}$=426.44, p<.001) shows partial main effects of duration of captivity, military training and location of captivity. This unveils that each one-unit increase in duration of captivity was associated with odds increasing by half. The odds further tripled when the former child soldier was military trained, and doubled when held captive in Sudan.

The analysis of covariance-model examining possible associations with the duration of captivity explained almost 60% (R^2=.60, $F_{(14,1588)}$=167.07, p<.001) of the variance in duration (table 6). Concerning the main terms, the model shows that the duration of captivity is related to the age at abduction, military training and location of captivity. It appears that the estimated mean duration of captivity was higher for military trained former child soldiers than for those who were not military trained. For interpreting the other main effects, their higher-order terms should be considered, as the location of captivity significantly interacted with the age at abduction and the gender role.

The relation between the duration of captivity and the age at abduction, marginal to location of captivity, is displayed in the 'effect plot' (Fox, 2003) in figure 1 panel (a). This graph was constructed for males who were military trained. This effect plot unveils that for both locations of captivity, a negative relation was expected between the age at abduction and duration of captivity. In other words, the younger these children were at abduction, the longer they were in captivity. However, it is clear from the effect plot that the estimated mean duration was higher and the observed negative trend more manifest for children held captive in Sudan. The relationship between the duration of captivity and the gender role, marginal to location of captivity, is displayed in figure 1 panel (b). This graph is constructed for mean-aged military trained former child soldiers. This effect plot indicates that females who were used as rebel's wife stayed in captivity considerably longer. No significant difference between females who were no rebel's wife and males was observed. Notice that the estimated mean duration was remarkably higher for children held captive in Sudan. Moreover, the difference in estimated mean duration for females who were rebel's wife and others was more pronounced when held captive in Sudan.

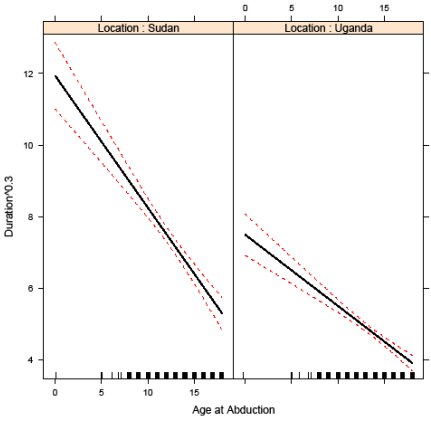
Tabel 6: Ancova of duration of captivity (box-cox)

Parameter	*Sum of Squares*	*df*	*F*	*β*	*SE*	*t*
Intercept	2515.72	1	1036.80***	14.34	0.62	23.14 ***
Age at abduction	380.80	1	156.94 ***	-0.35	0.05	-7.47 ***
Gender role *(rebel's wife†)*	30.57	2	6.30 **			
Female no rebel's wife				-0.44	0.93	-0.47
Male				-2.32	0.71	-3.27 ***
Military training *(yes†)*	40.27	1	16.60 ***			
No				-1.75	0.55	-3.21 ***
Location of captivity *(Sudan†)*	150.50	1	62.02 ***			
Uganda				-5.82	0.68	-8.53 ***
Age at abduction * Gender role	21.10	2	4.35 *			
Age*Female no rebel's wife				-0.18	0.07	-2.52 *
Age*Male				-0.02	0.05	-0.44
Age at abduction * Military training	7.29	1	3.01			
No				0.07	0.04	1.73
Age at abduction * Location of captivity	33.90	1	13.97 ***			
Age*Uganda				0.17	0.05	3.74 ***
Gender role * Military training	20.31	1	4.19 *			
Female no rebel's wife*No				-0.05	0.32	-0.14
Man*No				-0.61	0.26	-2.35 *
Location of captivity * gender role	121.41	2	25.02 ***			
Uganda*Female no rebel's wife				1.76	0.37	4.82 ***
Uganda*Man				1.81	0.27	6.70 ***
Military training * Location of captivity	1.28	1	0.53			
No*Uganda				-0.20	0.28	-0.73

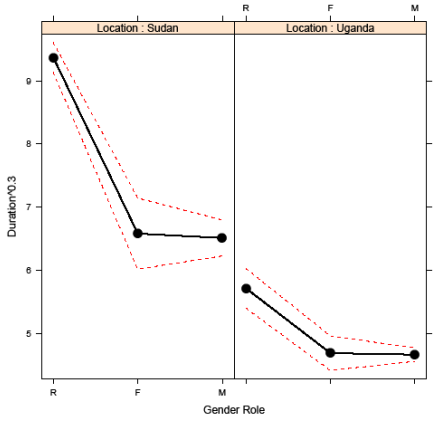
R^2= .60; † reference category; * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$

Figure 1: Effect plots for the interactions of Age of abduction and Location of captivity (a) and for the interaction of Gender role and Location of captivity (b). The "rug plot" at the bottom of panel (a) shows the distribution of Age, while at the bottom of panel (b) the different Gender role-categories are depicted. The broken lines represent the 95% point wise confidence interval around the estimated effect.

a. Age of abduction * Location of captivity



b. Gender role * Location of captivity



2.3.4 Return

As shown in table 7, a majority of 82% of the former child soldiers in this study escaped on their own initiative from the LRA, mostly while residing in Uganda. They usually seized the opportunity of diminished attention or distraction of their commanders. A minority of roughly 18% of the former child soldiers was released by the LRA or was rescued by an opposing armed force. Patterns in the initiative for leaving the LRA and the situation in which this was undertaken are found to be associated with the sex of the returning child soldiers.

Table 7: The return

Variable	**Total** *n*=1830	**Sex**			**Age at return†**	***F***
		Male *n*=1176	***Female*** *n*=654	χ^2		
Initiative				20.65***		1.69
Escape	1394 (82)	947 (85)	452 (77)		14.34 (2.60)	
Release	184 (11)	95 (8)	90 (15)		13.95 (3.19)	
Rescue	120 (7)	73 (7)	47 (8)		14.32 (2.97)	
Place				0.02		-1.21
Uganda	1670 (97)	1084 (97)	586 (97)		14.31 (2.70)	
Sudan	47 (3)	30 (3)	17 (3)		15.00 (3.87)	
Moment				18.89**		2.16
Attack	336 (24)	218 (23)	118 (26)		14.25 (2.55)	
At night	284 (20)	197 (21)	87 (19)		14.66 (2.34)	
On duty	265 (19)	201 (21)	64 (14)		14.06 (2.12)	
Marching	253 (18)	150 (16)	103 (23)		14.53 (3.00)	
Ambush	165 (12)	117 (12)	48 (11)		14.08 (2.75)	
Other	91 (7)	59 (6)	32 (7)		14.42 (3.26)	

***n* (%); † *M*(*SD*), ** *p*≤.01, *** *p*≤.001**

2.4 Discussion

This research on child soldiering as a civilian targeting strategy during the Ugandan armed conflict aimed at documenting the scope and nature of war-related experiences and at identifying risk factors for an increased exposure to warfare among former child soldiers. As such, enhanced insight into the child abuse and abduction patterns exerted by the LRA as well as into differentiating and adjusting care for former child soldiers upon return from the LRA is pursued. This was conducted by analyzing the intake-databases of reception centres, and in particular of the Rachele Rehabilitation Centre for returned former child soldiers in northern Uganda, and by studying the data on their captivity in the LRA.

The findings illustrate, in line with earlier studies (Amone-P'Olak, 2007; Blattman & Annan, 2008; Derluyn, Broekaert, Schuyten & De Temmerman, 2004; Pham et al., 2008), the vastness of abuse associated with child soldiering. The former child soldiers in this study were uprooted from their habitat and held captive by the LRA for on average more than a year, and some even for their entire adolescence. During this period of captivity, all were directly exposed to warfare, and the greater part reported a range of different war-related experiences. To begin with, they were victimized by the subjection to extremely precarious living conditions in the LRA, typified by scarcity of resources, physical exploitation, insecurity, etc. Besides, most of them witnessed various atrocities on a systematic and tremendous scale, such as seeing people dying from wounds, starvation or murder. Additionally, the majority of them declared to have also acted as perpetrator of atrocities, mostly targeting civilians or other armed factions.
As such, this research unveils that these child soldiers were in various ways exposed to warfare, and it appears that they have fulfilled a multifaceted position within the rebel faction, which is confirmed across other studies (Amone-P'Olak, 2007; Annan et al., 2006). This designates that the LRA adopts child soldiering not only to fill their ranks and thus for recruitment purposes, but also to actively engage against the opponent and thus as a civilian targeting strategy. In consequence of this strategic purpose, the potential impact of child soldiering on the psychosocial well-being of former child soldiers is likely to occur both directly and indirectly, and to reach far beyond the individual level of the child. Direct effects can occur through creating distress in former child soldiers, e.g., post-traumatic stress symptoms due to their horrendous experiences (Derluyn et al., 2004; Miller & Rasmussen, 2010). Indirect effects can emanate through disrupting societal life, e.g., challenging living conditions due to massive displacement, negative social attitudes due to their dubious role in the conflict, social exclusion due to their long absence from society (Betancourt, Agnew-Blais, Gilman, Williams & Ellis, 2010; Wessells, 2009).

Despite this immense extent of exposure to warfare through child soldiering, some risk factors associated with increased exposure can be identified, resulting in considerable variation in duration, scope and nature of exposure to warfare among the former child soldiers included in this study. A longer duration of captivity is associated with more different war-related experiences and an increased likelihood of witnessing and perpetrating atrocities. As this finding does not represent the total number of war-related experiences, but rather embodies the single occurrence of different experiences one had during child soldiering, this finding may indicate that the experiences of child soldiers with the LRA evolve over time

and that the longer they stay in the LRA, the more responsible and active their position becomes.

Secondly, military training appears to be associated with a longer and more divers exposure to warfare, given the longer duration of captivity, more different war-related experiences and an increased likelihood of witnessing and perpetrating atrocities. A longer exposure to warfare may be explained by the fact that during military training, the child soldiers reside in a training camp, kept under severe surveillance, limiting the possibilities to escape (Amone-P'Olak, 2007). Other child soldiers who are forced to perpetrate atrocities during military training might be too afraid to escape due to dreaded reprisals in the community (Allen & Schomerus, 2006). The increased exposure to warfare associated with military training can be explained by its inherent drill in terms of highly prevailing coercion to witness or perpetrate atrocities, in order to develop a 'military mind-set' (Human Rights Watch, 2005).

Further, the location of captivity seems of pivotal importance, showing that Sudan's child soldiering conditions were often even worse than the already deplorable circumstances in Uganda. Being held captive in Sudan tends to be associated with more different war-related experiences, an increased likelihood of participating in atrocities, and a longer duration of captivity for those abducted at a younger age or used as a rebel's wife. The increased exposure to warfare can be explained by the fact that southern Soudan is a highly militarized environment created by belligerent Sudanese and Ugandan armed groups (Schomerus, 2007). The longer duration might result from the fact that being further away from home in an unknown area is a potential threshold to escape, as it possibly could have triggered feelings of insecurity especially in younger children. Besides, rebel's wives were often under watch and kept ward in encampments, reducing the opportunities to escape or to be rescued (Pham et al., 2008). Another possible explanation is that given the status of rebel's wives within the LRA and the fact that many of them had children out of this experience, some just opted to stay in this structure (Pham et al., 2008).

Being abducted at an older age and being used as rebel's wife are also associated with more different war-related experiences, as the main effects of age of abduction and gender role tend to be of significant importance. With respect to age, a plausible hypothesis is that somehow younger children are spared and can benefit from a certain protection within the rebel movement, for example because they are assigned rather supportive roles. Regarding females used as rebel's wife, this higher exposure may be accounted for by the additional experiences related to the involved sexual exploitation.

These variations in war-related experiences during child soldiering support the hypothesis that former child soldiers are a heterogeneous group, discouraging any generalization on how former child soldiers have been affected by their experiences (Betancourt, 2008; Wessells, 2006). They further deliver evidence for assumed trends in abductions carried out by the LRA and show that certain variables have predictive value in estimating the particular exposure to warfare of every former child soldier (Human Rights Watch, 2005).

In order to address the complex way in which child soldiering as a civilian targeting strategy may affect the psychosocial well-being of former child soldiers, some recommendations towards support evolving along two complementary tracks can be deduced.

Initially, due to the long absence in society and the extraordinary experiences associated with child soldiering, it is plausible that former child soldiers are in need of psychological support, assistance with tracing their relatives and a gradual transition from military to civilian life. Therefore, a centralized approach like the reception centres - aimed at receiving and providing psychosocial emergency relief to former child soldiers at return from rebel captivity - can be valuable (Boothby, Crawford &Halperin, 2006; Rivard, 2010). Given the disparity of experiences associated with child soldiering, it becomes apparent though that a 'one-size-fits-all approach' is inappropriate and individualized support is needed (Wessells, 2009). In individualizing support, these initiatives can initially draw on factors associated with increased exposure to warfare, in order to identify those most likely to be at risk due to the scope and nature of their war-related experiences (Hatch & Dorenwend, 2007). Although this does not imply that these children are determined to manifest difficulties, particular attention can be paid to how they evolve so that early intervention can be offered when psychosocial challenges arise.

Besides, given that many LRA casualties are inflicted on civilians and that former child soldiers tend to be extensively involved in these LRA-hostilities towards civilians, child soldiering may possibly elicit challenges towards the social integration of former child soldiers into the war-affected society. Consequently, initiatives from a community-based approach should be orientated towards communities that receive former child soldiers. Such an approach initially aims at strengthening war-affected communities and may lead to the acknowledgement of the victimization of war-affected civilians (Rauchfuss & Schmolze, 2008), amplification of their capacities and resources (Boothby, 2008) and stimulate a reconciled context (Baines, Stover & Wierda, 2006; Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2008b; Wessells, 2005). Subsequently, it pursuits mobilizing the community in

order to encourage shared responsibility (Boothby, 2008) and create sustainable support structures with minimal professional monitoring (Bolton & Betancourt, 2004; Wessells, 2006). These conditions are considered facilitative for the resilience of the community and therefore beneficial for the psychosocial well-being of former child soldiers (Miller, Kulkarni & Kushner, 2006; Pham et al., 2009; Wessells, 2006).
As efforts should address both the potential direct and indirect consequences of child soldiering and thus be oriented towards both the individual and the war-affected society receiving former child soldiers, an ecological approach offers the framework that initiatives targeting the psychosocial impact of child soldiering should draw on. Such an ecological framework presumes that a child's development occurs within nested social layers and is indissolubly connected to interrelated relationships and settings (Boothy, 2008; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Concerning child soldiering, it perceives civilian targeting strategies during armed conflict as an ecological destabilisation, implying that the impact on the psychosocial well-being of former child soldiers is interrelated with the way the social environment is affected by and is able to recover from this ecological challenge (Boothby, 2008; Miller et al., 2006). Therefore, it considers the best psychosocial response to child soldiering being one on multiple levels, addressing both the individual and its social ecology (Boothby, 2008). Consequently, such a framework covering the potential devastating impact of child soldiering on the child's well-being as well as on the surrounding social sphere, offers a comprehensive approach for addressing the complex ways in which child soldiering as a civilian targeting strategy produces psychosocial repercussions.

The research' limitations mostly relate to the data collection procedure: rehabilitation centres operated in a context of high rebel activity and insecurity, challenging the circumstances of data collection and conservation, where foreseen protocols could not always be followed and some data were missing. However, these records of reception centres form a unique source of information on returning child soldiers. Limitations can also be attributed to the retrospective and traumatizing nature of the reported data, as this can possibly lead to recall bias (Pearson, Ross & Dawes, 1994). Besides, reporting to professionals possibly induces bias as this may be distorted by the expectation of receiving support accordingly (Netland, 2005). As this database does not constitute a random sample, this research is also limited to those former child soldiers registered by reception centres, possibly biasing the results as characteristics and experiences of those who return home immediately after captivity may differ from those who stay in a centre. Further, data on the war-exposure of

non-conscripted children in northern Uganda is lacking, limiting opportunities for a comparative study on exposure to warfare. Consequently, future research should be oriented towards approaching these gaps. Studying the experiences of unregistered former child soldiers and non-conscripted war-affected youth in northern Uganda would replenish the insight in the exposure to warfare caused by child soldiering as a civilian targeting strategy during armed conflict.

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3

Beyond child soldiering: longer term psychosocial well-being and associated factors*

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"We do not yet know how these children will turn out as adults; for better or for worse that will depend more on the opportunities provided or denied to them now than on any one of the events of their recent pasts."

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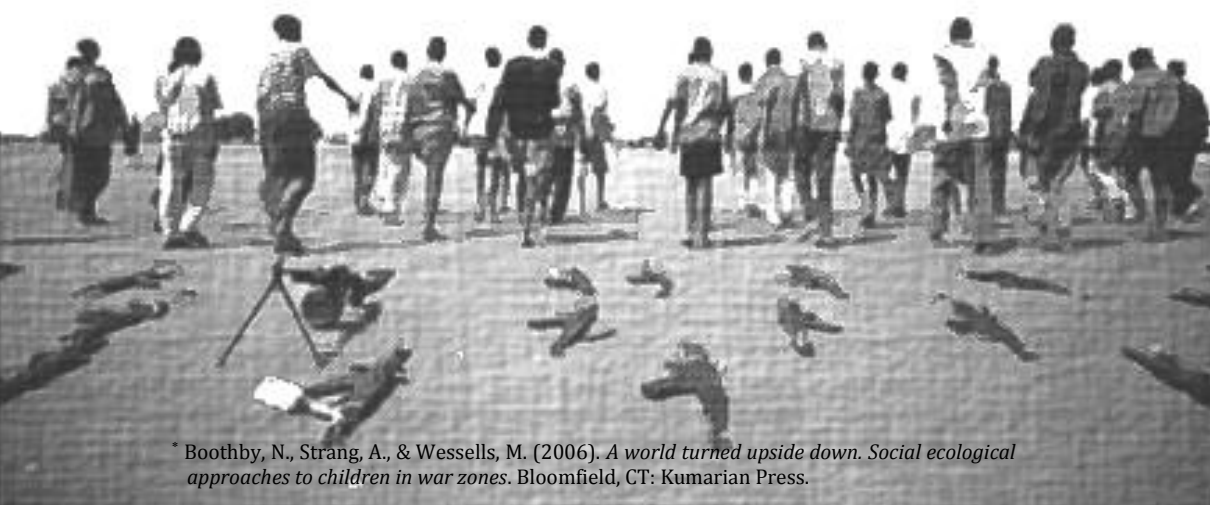

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Abstract

Given the various developments in former child soldiers' psychosocial well-being over time, the question arises as to which factors are associated with the prevalence of psychological distress. An ongoing debate points to the plausible importance of both child soldiering-related factors and post-child soldiering factors. This study therefore aims to explore both types of association with former child soldiers' psychosocial well-being in the longer term.

Follow-up data on 424 northern Ugandan former child soldiers, acquired from the Rachele Rehabilitation Centre, are analyzed using binary logistic regression analysis of five psychological symptoms repeatedly measured at intake and follow-up assessment. Thereby, both child soldiering-related and post-child soldiering variables are accounted for.

The outcomes reveal almost no significant main effects of child soldiering-related variables, while a range of post-child soldiering variables (number of meals a day, school attendance, insults and professional support) are clearly associated with the prevalence of the repeatedly measured psychological symptoms.

This implies that the impact of war-exposure should - albeit sufficiently acknowledged - not be overemphasized, and that post-child soldiering conditions and their interference with psychosocial well-being should be granted proportionally higher attention.

3.1 Introduction

Although acts of war in northern Uganda have dropped significantly since 2006, this society still bears the scars of a decades-long conflict. While this conflict is complex given its far-reaching historical roots, erratic course and involvement of various actors, it is apparent that the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) plays a pivotal role in it (International Crisis Group, 2004). The LRA's reign of terror left hundreds of thousands of people killed, maimed, displaced, abducted, and deprived of resources and basic rights (Human Rights Watch, 2006; International Crisis Group, 2004). Among them, many former child soldiers – forcibly recruited and brutally abused by the LRA – face the challenge of dealing with the impact of not only war at large, but also of child soldiering (Annan, Brier & Aryemo, 2009).

Despite the variations arising from the diversity of contexts studied, methods used and timeframes chosen (Rodin & van Ommeren, 2009), previous research has found a high prevalence of psychological distress amongst Ugandan former child soldiers relatively soon after they have left the LRA (Blattman & Annan, 2008; Derluyn, Broekaert, Schuyten et al., 2004; Okello, Onen & Musisi, 2007). Symptoms include a range of internalizing and externalizing problems, such as fear, nightmares, guilt, withdrawnness, and aggression, as well as psychosomatic complains such as headache, stomach ache and decreased appetite (Derluyn & Broekaert, 2010; Okello et al., 2007). Such psychological symptoms have been ascribed primarily to the child soldiers' intensified involvement in warfare and their increased exposure to acts of war (Annan, Blattman, Carlson, & Mazurana, 2007). For this reason, previous research has focused on the 'dose-effect' relationship between adversity-related factors and the psychological well-being of former child soldiers (Blattman & Annan, 2008). It has delivered consistent evidence showing that the level of exposure to warfare - including the extent and severity of war-related experiences (with being forced to perpetrate hostilities oneself exerting a strong influence) and the duration of captivity – is positively related to symptomatology (Barenbaum, Ruchkin & Schwab-Stone, 2004; Boothby, 2006). This evidence proposes the hypothesis that the former child soldiers exhibiting the most serious psychological symptoms are those who experienced the greatest war-related adversity. Underlying this focus on the 'dose-effect' relationship is the premise that war exposure forms the major determinant of former child soldiers' psychological distress (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010).

However, recent literature emphasizes the importance of post-adversity sources of distress that impinge on this relationship between adversity and

psychological distress. Studies therefore started to incorporate such factors in the explanatory model of psychological symptoms (Betancourt et al., 2010; Fernando, Miller & Berger, 2010; Loughry & Eyber, 2003; Miller & Rasmussen, 2010; Stichick, 2001). A review of these studies indicates that war exposure typically explains not more than 25% of the variance in psychological symptoms and that the addition of post-adversity factors increases the overall explanatory power of the model and weakens the predictive power of war exposure (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010). This suggests that studies solely focusing on the 'dose-effect' relationship have overestimated the role of direct exposure to war-related adversity and have masked the contribution of daily living conditions in the aftermath of war. Studies of the association between post-adversity factors and the psychosocial well-being of war-affected youth have identified intrapersonal, interpersonal and structural factors. On the intrapersonal level, factors such as sex, age, personality traits and coping mechanisms have been identified as influential (Barenbaum et al., 2004; Loughry & Eyber, 2003; Williams, Alexander, Bolsover & Bakke, 2008), while on the interpersonal level, social structures and mechanisms have been observed to produce stressors that magnify the impact of child soldiering (Aneshensel & Phelan, 1999; Betancourt, Agnew-Blais, Gilman, Williams & Ellis, 2010; Betancourt, Brennan, Rubin-Smith, Fitzmaurice & Gilman, 2010; Kohrt et al., 2010; Miller, Kulkarni & Kushner, 2006; Miller, Omidian, Rasmussen, Yaqubi & Daudzai, 2008). Social structures and mechanisms are severely affected by war and disrupted in its aftermath, installing considerable challenges and limiting resources for former child soldiers (Betancourt & Khan, 2008; Pedersen, 2002). As such, warfare impinges on family composition and the presence of familial support figures, which has been associated with increased psychosocial distress (Mels, Derluyn, & Broekaert, 2008; Miller & Rasmussen, 2010). It also devastates livelihoods and means to meet basic needs, initiating or deteriorating poverty, which has been identified as a source of distress (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2007; Wessells, 2006a). Recent studies observed that negative social attitudes such as stigmatization are frequently experienced by former child soldiers and exert a significant influence on their psychological well-being (Betancourt et al., 2010; Blattman & Annan, 2008; Wessells, 2009). War impacts also on the educational system and reduces the population benefiting from formal schooling (Think piece commissioned for the EFA Global Monitoring Report, 2011), a disquieting finding given that education has been associated with better psychological functioning and therefore represents a source of strength (Kohrt et al., 2010). War-induced displacement to IDP-camps evokes a constellation of resettlement-related challenges, such as overcrowded living, poor hygiene and inadequate housing, which have

consistently been predicting psychological distress (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010). Additionally, institutionalized resources supporting former child soldiers often cause agitation in the war-affected society when considered as 'reward for perpetrators' (Blattman & Annan, 2008).

These factors thus may create additional stressors to former child soldiers' psychological well-being (Betancourt et al., 2010), which clearly documents the intertwining of psychological and social factors – therefore referred to as 'psychosocial well-being' (Psychosocial Working Group, 2003) – and exemplifies the influences not only of war exposure but also of post-war challenges on former child soldiers' psychosocial well-being (Aneshensel & Phelan, 1999; Miller et al., 2008). This notion of post-child soldiering stressors creating additional risks to psychological well-being is embodied in the 'partial mediation model' (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010), that points to the importance of these multiple determinants of psychological distress in the wake of child soldiering. However, research has focused disproportionally on exclusively identifying the impact of child soldiering experiences and has paid scant attention to post-child soldiering influences (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010). Moreover, most studies examining the well-being of former child soldiers have been executed shortly after their return, while considerably less is known about evolutions in child soldiers' psychosocial well-being and the factors influencing these evolutions in the longer term. This study therefore aims to explore potential associations of both child soldiering-related and post-child soldiering factors with the longer term psychosocial well-being of former child soldiers. The main hypothesis studied is that psychosocial well-being is not solely related to war exposure, but also to factors emanating from life in the wake of child soldiering.

3.2 Method

3.2.1 Procedure

This study originates from an opportunity to study the records of former child soldiers collected by Rachele Rehabilitation Centre – a former Interim Care Centre for returned child soldiers in Lira (northern Uganda) – whereby the centre shared its intake and follow-up data on the former child soldiers it supported.

The *intake* data was collected by staff members of the centre during a one-to-one interview in the first week after the child's arrival at the centre

during the period October 2003 to September 2006. During this interview, the staff administered a self-developed 'Intake Status Assessment Form', a checklist requesting information on socio-demographic background (e.g., gender, age at intake), the circumstances of abduction (e.g., age at abduction), the incidence and nature of war-related experiences (e.g., number of different war-related experiences, participation in hostilities), the circumstances of captivity (e.g., duration of captivity), psychological distress symptoms (e.g., fear, nightmares, withdrawnness, suicidal thinking, sensitivity) and the family situation returning to (e.g., presence of parents, displacement). This procedure is described in greater detail in Vindevogel et al. (2011).

The *follow-up* data was gathered during assessments of former child soldiers between October and December 2006. The centre's staff conducted one-to-one interviews, using the interviewer-administered 'Follow-up Status Assessment Form' that had been self-developed on the basis of former child soldiers' foregoing narratives and what appeared therein to be the most common challenges and psychological symptoms for former child soldiers, as well as information necessary to conduct adequate follow-up assessment. This measure has the form of a checklist and thus consists of closed-ended questions covering the child's socio-demographic background (e.g., gender, age at follow-up, time elapsed since return), financial situation (e.g., number of meals a day), occupation (e.g., school attendance), institutionalized resources (e.g., professional support) and social acceptance (e.g., insults). The questions also included current psychological functioning, for example fear (i.e. being afraid), nightmares (i.e. bad dreams), withdrawnness (i.e. emotional and/or social detachment from the outer world), suicidal thinking (i.e. thoughts of ending life), and sensitivity (i.e. intense emotional and/or physical reactions to unexpected external stimuli). All variables were measured by a single question, probing for the occurrence of a certain life situation or experience, for instance, 'are you currently attending school?', 'do you experience nightmares?', 'are you insulted by others in the community?'. An open-ended question explored the type of professional support previously provided and the organization providing it. The assessment forms were designed in English and simultaneously forward and backward translated on-site in the local language Luo, the mother tongue of all the participants.

Apart from the usual support provided by the centre, the participants did not receive compensation for their participation in the assessments. Psychosocial support was foreseen by the centre as being required during and following the assessments in order to address severe psychosocial distress in the participants. Given the high illiteracy rate among former child

soldiers, the centre sought the participants' verbal assent for the follow-up assessment. The centre was not able to collect the consent of minors' legally authorized representatives due to a range of practical constraints, including the primary caregivers and children living in separate places, the remote residence of the primary caretakers and the insecurity of travel in the insurgent area. Since this study uses an anonymous secondary data source, the general requirements for obtaining informed assent/consent were waived. This study was approved by the Ethical Committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of Ghent University.

3.2.2 Participants

Given that the follow-up assessment was carried out in the midst of the war, the participants were conveniently sampled based on the physical accessibility and security status of various northern Ugandan war-affected areas near the venue of the Rachele Rehabilitation Centre, of which Lira, Pader and Amuru are the most prevalent. Within these areas, the former child soldiers previously received at the centre were visited and assessed for follow-up. The follow-up was thus restricted to former residents of Rachele Rehabilitation Centre who were then residing in certain more readily accessible geographical areas. This procedure resulted in a follow-up of nearly a quarter (*n*=424, 23%) of all former child soldiers received at the Rachele Rehabilitation Centre.

Table 1: Comparison of characteristics between selected follow-up sample and non-selected intake sample

Variable	**Sample not selected for follow-up** *n*=1406	**Sample selected for follow-up** *n*=424	χ^2/t
Gender (male)	878 (62)	298 (70)	8.71
Age at intake	14.59 (2.89)	13.53 (2.34)	6.95***
Age at abduction	13.33 (2.34)	12.84 (2.30)	3.74 ***
Duration of captivity†	424.00 (521.06)	340.68 (394.40)	3.42***
Participation in hostilities	1019 (77)	297 (73)	3.24
Number of different war-related experiences	8.35 (3.17)	7.99 (2.99)	2.05
Fear at intake	810 (64)	249 (65)	0.06
Withdrawn at intake	507 (40)	164 (43)	0.80
Nightmares at intake	484 (38)	154 (40)	0.50
Sensitivity at intake	258 (20)	72 (19)	0.42
Suicidal thinking at intake	23 (2)	7 (2)	0.00

***n*(%)/*M*(*SD*); ***Given the large sample size, α = .001 as threshold for significance.**
†Since these data are heavily skewed to the right, outliers (defined as scores above *M*+2.5*SD*) were removed.

Comparative analysis was undertaken to test for significant differences between the former child soldiers selected for follow-up and those unable to be reached for follow-up. More concretely, χ^2 and *t*-tests were applied to compare the two samples on the major socio-demographic characteristics, child soldiering-related variables and symptoms of psychological distress upon intake assessment. The results of these tests (table 1) indicate that – with exception of differences in mean age and duration of captivity – the two samples do not significantly differ, demonstrating the adequacy of the follow-up subsample.

3.2.3 Analysis

In order to address the aim and main hypothesis of this study, a set of variables was selected from the Rachele Rehabilitation Centre's database that were indicative of socio-demographic characteristics, child soldiering-related experiences and post-child soldiering living conditions (table 2). Of the list of psychological symptoms that were measured during follow-up assessment, only those symptoms that were repeatedly measured upon intake and follow-up are retained in this study (table 3).

To explore which variables are important in predicting whether psychological symptoms are present upon follow-up assessment, binary logistic models are built, using a two-phase backward selection stepwise search procedure (step down). This procedure starts by fitting a model including all variables. In the following step, the model selects the variable with the highest non-significant *p*-value, which is then deleted from the initial model. This procedure continues as long as variables can be removed from the model.

In a first phase, the initial model included the three socio-demographic variables, the child soldiering-related variables and the presence of the symptom at intake assessment. The three demographic variables were retained in the model, even if the *p*-value was not significant. Via the described step down method, possible significant child soldiering-related associations were detected.

In a second phase, the initial model included the three demographic variables and, if selected, the relevant child soldiering-related variables and the related symptom upon intake-assessment. Since the analysis controlled for these variables, they could not be deleted by the selection method. The post-child soldiering variables, their interaction with time since return and all other possible two-way interactions were additionally included. By including time since return as a main term and its possible two-way interaction with other variables, differences in duration between the

baseline and follow-up assessment were controlled for. Again, via the described step down procedure, relevant variables were selected. Alpha is set at 0.05.

3.3 Results

3.3.1 Socio-demographic characteristics

As shown in table 2, the sample comprises two thirds male and one third female participants with an average age of 15 years. All were abducted and conscripted as child soldiers by the LRA, at the mean age of 13 years. During their time with the LRA – on average more than one year – they encountered about eight different war-related experiences, of which most refer to precarious living conditions and to witnessing or experiencing abuse. The majority were also forced to participate in hostilities themselves.

Table 2: Sample characteristics

Variable	*n (%)*
Socio-demographic variables	
Gender	
Male	298 (70)
Female	126(30)
Age at follow up (10-23 years)†	15.21 (2.45)
Time since return (30-1160 days)†	813.91 (272.51)
0-1 year	47 (11.08)
1-2 years	69 (16.27)
2-3 years	256 (60.38)
>3 years	52 (12.26)
Child soldiering-related variables (intake)	
Age at abduction (5-18 years)†	12.84 (2.30)
Duration of captivity (1-3693 days)†	381.20 (517.03); 241.50‡
Participation in hostilities	297 (73)
Number of different war-related experiences (1-15)†	7.99 (2.98)
Post-child soldiering variables (follow-up)	
Presence of parents	
Father dead	108 (26)
Mother dead	47 (11)
Both parents dead	33 (8)
Displacement	327 (84)
School attendance	326 (77)
Number of meals a day	
One	129 (31)
Two	251 (60)
Three	35 (8)
Insults	226 (49)
Professional support	194 (46)

†M(SD)
‡Since these data are heavily skewed to the right, the median is additionally reported

After their stay in the Interim Care Centre, most of the participants returned to their families who had shifted into Internal Displacement Camps. The majority found both parents, but some had lost one or both parents. At the moment of follow-up assessment, the average elapsed time since the return from the LRA was more than two years. At that time, the majority of the participants had started going back to school. Most of the participants were able to take one or two meals a day and only a minority could afford three meals. Nearly half of the sample reported insults by other people, most frequently as 'child/wife of Kony', 'rebel' or 'killer'. Apart from going through the Rachele Rehabilitation Centre upon return from the LRA, almost half of the participants had received professional support since returning to the community. The types of support from which they benefited were the amnesty package, including being granted amnesty and receiving basic resettlement goods (*n*=112, 48%), additional support provided by a rehabilitation centre such as sponsoring of school fees (*n*=63, 27%), material support from the UN World Food Program (*n*=37, 16%) and support in setting up income-generating activities (*n*=20, 9%).

3.3.2 Psychological symptoms

Upon follow-up assessment, the participants displayed an average of 1.53 (*SD*=1.22, *range*=0-5) of the five measured symptoms. A quarter of the sample (*n*=104, 25%) did not report any symptoms, about a quarter (*n*=113, 27%) reported one symptom, another quarter (*n*=108, 26%) reported two symptoms and the remaining quarter (*n*=95, 23%) reported three to five symptoms. The prevalence of the five repeatedly measured symptoms indicates considerable evolution over time (table 3).

Table 3: Prevalence of psychological symptoms at intake and follow-up assessment

Variable	I *n* (%)	FU *n* (%)	I:0/FU:0†	I:1/FU:0†	I:1/FU:1†	I:0/FU:1†
Sensitivity	72 (19)	230 (61)	121 (32)	25 (7)	45 (12)	185 (49)
Fear	245 (64)	146 (38)	86 (23)	149 (39)	96 (25)	50 (13)
Nightmares	152 (40)	136 (36)	144 (38)	99 (26)	53 (14)	83 (22)
Suicidal thinking	7 (2)	25 (7)	342 (92)	6 (2)	1 (0)	24 (6)
Withdrawn	161 (43)	21 (6)	200 (53)	155 (41)	6 (2)	15 (4)

† I=Intake, FU=Follow-Up; 0-0 = no occurrence at both assessments (no manifestation of the symptom over time), 0-1 = only occurrence at follow-up assessment (manifestation of the symptom since returning to the community), 1-0 = only occurrence at intake assessment (disappearance of the symptom over time) and 1-1 = occurrence at both assessments (persistent manifestation of the symptom).

An overview of the final binary logistic regression models for all of the five repeatedly measured psychological symptoms is depicted in table 4.

Starting with the model for sensitivity ($\chi^2_{(10)}$=45.26, p<0.001), significant main effects of the number of meals a day, professional support and school attendance are found. Participants having only one meal are three times more likely to be sensitive than participants having two meals. The odds of participants who receive professional support experiencing sensitivity are four times smaller than the odds for participants who do not receive professional support. Participants attending school are also three times less likely to be sensitive than those who do not. There is also a slight trend in time since return from the LRA, suggesting that the longer the participants have returned, the smaller the likelihood of being sensitive, albeit this effect is not significant.

The model for fear ($\chi^2_{(8)}$=30.11, p<0.001) shows significant main effects of the number of meals a day and insults. The odds indicate that when having only one meal, the likelihood of experiencing fear doubles in comparison with having two meals. Participants experiencing insults are almost twice as likely to report fear than participants who are not insulted.

The model for nightmares ($\chi^2_{(9)}$=38.73, p<0.001) reveals significant main effects of insults, school attendance and professional support. The effects of insults and professional support occur in interaction, as depicted in figure 1. This plot indicates that in the population of participants who do not receive professional support, the estimated proportion of nightmares is significantly higher when insulted than when not insulted. Among those who received professional support, there is no difference between those insulted and not insulted, and there is no difference among insulted child soldiers based on whether or not they have received support. In addition, the odds for school attendance show that participants who do not attend school are twice as likely to have nightmares as participants attending school.

The model for suicidal thinking ($\chi^2_{(5)}$=11.73, p=0.039) reveals a main effect of age upon follow-up assessment. This implies that each one-unit increase in age results in a 1.28 unit increase in the odds of suicidal thinking. None of the other measured variables are significantly associated with the prevalence of suicidal thinking.

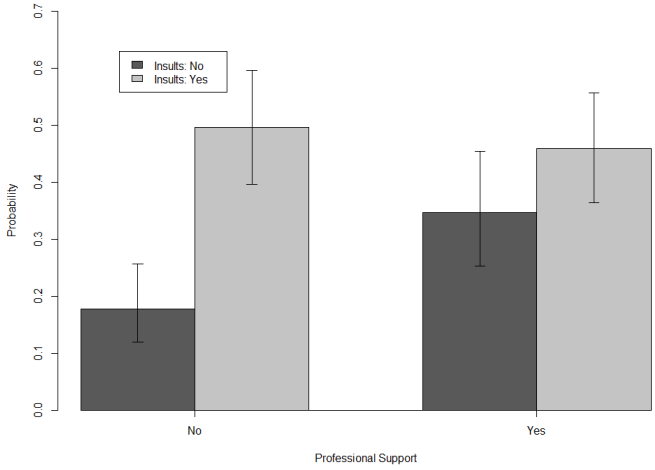
The model for withdrawnness ($\chi^2_{(7)}$=19.78, p=0.006) shows main effects of gender, duration of captivity and insults. This means that the odds for males to be withdrawn are 0.39 times smaller than the odds for females. The model further indicates that each one-unit increase in duration of captivity slightly decreases the odds of being withdrawn from 1.00 to 0.96. The odds of withdrawnness also triple for participants being insulted compared to participants not being insulted.

Table 4: Binary Logistic Regression Analysis

Parameter	*β*	*SD*	*Z*	*df*	Exp(*β*)
Sensitivity (*AIC*:514.61)					
(Intercept)	1.76	1.02	1.71	1	5.81
Gender *(female†)*	0.22	0.25	0.89	1	1.25
Age at follow-up	0.07	0.05	1.29	1	1.07
Number of meals a day *(one†)* ($\chi^2_{(2,396)}$=24.58***)				2	
Two meals	-1.21	0.26	-4.60***		0.30
Three meals	-0.22	0.47	-0.47		0.80
Time since return *(0-1 years†)* ($\chi^2_{(3,396)}$=9.47*)				3	
1-2 years	0.17	0.44	0.40		1.18
2-3 years	-0.53	0.37	-1.45		0.59
> 3 years	-0.88	0.47	-1.87		0.41
School *(no†)*	-1.17	0.50	-2.32*	1	0.31
Professional support *(no†)*	-1.40	0.54	-2.58**	1	0.25
School *(no†)* * Professional support *(no†)*	1.17	060	1.96	1	3.22
Fear (*AIC*: 570.40)					
(Intercept)	-0.52	0.78	-0.665	1	0.59
Gender *(female†)*	0.02	0.23	0.08	1	1.02
Age at follow-up	0.04	0.05	0.80	1	1.04
Number of meals a day *(one†)* ($\chi^2_{(2,402)}$=13.79***)				2	
Two meals	-0.83	0.23	-3.58***		0.43
Three meals	-0.55	0.40	-1.38		0.58
Time since return *(0-1 years†)* ($\chi^2_{(3,402)}$=6.03)				3	
1-2 years	0.18	0.40	0.45		1.20
2-3 years	-0.37	0.34	-1.09		0.69
> 3 years	-0.66	0.46	-1.44		0.52
Insults *(no†)*	0.65	0.21	3.07**	1	1.91
Nightmares (*AIC*: 527.22)					
(Intercept)	-0.17	0.89	-0.19	1	0.84
Gender *(female†)*	0.18	0.24	0.74	1	1.20
Age at follow-up	-0.02	0.05	-0.49	1	0.98
Time since return *(0-1 years†)* ($\chi^2_{(3,407)}$=3.50)				3	
1-2 years	-0.35	0.41	-0.84		0.70
2-3 years	-0.69	0.35	-1.97*		0.50
> 3 years	-0.75	0.46	-1.63		0.47
Insults (no†)	1.52	0.32	4.76***	1	4.57
School (no†)	-0.73	0.28	-2.66**	1	0.48
Professional support *(no†)*	0.90	0.33	2.72**	1	2.46
Insults *(no†)* * Professional support *(no†)*	-1.05	0.44	-2.39*	1	0.35
Suicidal thinking (*AIC*: 204.26)					
(Intercept)	-6.04	1.40	-4.31***	1	0.00
Gender *(female†)*	-0.31	0.41	-0.76	1	0.73
Age at follow-up	0.24	0.08	3.19**	1	1.28
Time since return *(0-1 years†)* ($\chi^2_{(3,407)}$=0.39)				3	
2 years	-0.03	0.77	-0.03		0.97
3 years	-0.23	0.66	-0.34		0.80
> 3 years	-0.41	0.82	-0.50		0.66
Withdrawnness (*AIC*: 188.90)					
(Intercept)	-2.83	1.55	-1.83	1	0.06
Gender *(female†)*	-0.94	0.42	-2.22*	1	0.39
Age at follow-up	0.04	0.09	0.46	1	1.04
Duration of captivity	-0.04	0.23	-1.97*	1	0.96
Time since return *(0-1 years†)* ($\chi^2_{(3,394)}$=0.48)				3	
2 years	0.20	0.77	0.26		1.22
3 years	-0.16	0.71	-0.22		0.85
> 3 years	0.11	0.85	0.13		1.12
Insults *(no†)*	1.16	0.49	2.38*	1	3.19

*** *p*≤.05; ** *p*≤.01; *** *p*≤.001; †Reference category**

Figure 1: Bar plot of insults and professional support on nightmares. Error bars represent the 95-percent pointwise confidence interval.



3.4 Discussion

Through studying follow-up data on former child soldiers, collected by the Rachele Rehabilitation Centre in northern Uganda, this research aims at exploring evolutions in the participants' psychological symptoms and potential associations with the longer term prevalence of these symptoms.

Considering the prevalence of the measured psychological symptoms over time, various important developments are found. Particularly interesting is the finding that as well as symptoms showing decreased or sustained prevalence, some symptoms become more prevalent in the longer term. This demonstrates how psychosocial well-being may evolve along miscellaneous strajectories (Boothby, 2006; Layne, Beck, Rimmasch et al., 2009; Wessells, 2009). It also raises the question as to which factors influence former child soldiers' psychosocial well-being over time. In this study, particular attention is paid to the importance of child soldiering-related variables in comparison with post-child soldiering variables.

This study reveals that the child soldiering-related variables measured in this study do not yield a considerable influence on the psychological symptoms of distress upon follow-up assessment. Only the duration of captivity is found to have a significant though small effect, rendering it rather negligible. Although the 'dose-effect' relationship has previously been

identified in the short term (Bayer, Klasen, & Adam, 2007; Blattman & Annan, 2008; Kohrt et al., 2008), the findings of this study suggest that former child soldiers' psychological distress is in the longer term related rather to post-child soldiering variables, confirming this study's main hypothesis and other study findings (Betancourt et al., 2010; Kohrt et al., 2008; Loughry & Eyber, 2003; Miller & Rasmussen, 2010; Thabet & Vostanis, 2000).

The post-child soldiering variables tesify to challenging living conditions that may induce or exacerbate psychological strain. Indicative of the financial situation of the participants, the number of meals a day is associated with the prevalence of sensitivity and fear. That this effect is mainly situated on the level of one meal and diminishes from two meals onwards is indicative of the precarious nature of the participants' situation. A plausible explanation for this identified association is that the difficult living situation of most participants, wherein financial means are restricted and basic needs are hardly met, forms a source of distress for the participants, inducing or exacerbating psychological strain (Fernando et al., 2010; Miller et al., 2008).

Furthermore, school attendance is associated with the prevalence of sensitivity and nightmares, indicating that the participants who attend school are less likely to exhibit these symptoms. This might suggest that attending school operates as a resource for the participants, strengthening them to deal with distress and contributing to better psychosocial functioning (Betancourt et al., 2010; Kohrt et al., 2010).

Additionally, this research clearly brings forward the paramount association of insults with psychological symptoms, as the participants who are insulted have an increased likelihood of experiencing fear and withdrawnness, and in interaction with professional support also nightmares. As known from previous research on the stigmatization of former child soldiers, being insulted forms a stressful experience, which is associated with an increased prevalence of diverse psychological symptoms (Betancourt et al., 2010). The interaction-effect of insults with professional support indicates that professional support does not demonstrate a mitigating effect on the effects of insults on nightmares. Professional support is additionally associated with a decreased prevalence of sensitivity. Because of the design of this study, it is impossible to conclude whether professional support had an impact on psychological outcomes in this sample.

The finding that suicidal ideation by this population of former child soldiers increases with age corroborates broader observations that in general populations of young people it increases substantially during the adolescent

period in the life span (Holinger & Luke, 1984; Marcenko, Fishman & Friedman, 1999). During adolescence, biological, cognitive and psychological changes occur that permit consideration of suicide to increase as adolescence unfolds and brings about more existential challenges (Erikson, 1980; Marcenko et al., 1999; Wessells, 2006b).

Although child soldiering-related variables did not exert main effects on the longer term psychosocial well-being of the participants, they can moderate stressful daily living conditions in the aftermath of child soldiering. Moreover, the main effects of child soldiering on the psychosocial well-being of formerly recruited young people could become moreapparent in a comparative study with their non-recruited counterparts, meaning that the effects identified in this study mayrather represent the additive effects of daily living conditions that lead to increased distress in former child soldiers. Nonetheless, the exploratory findings of this study bring the post-child soldiering factors to the fore, illustrating how daily living conditions are decisively associated with former child soldiers' psychological health. This delivers support to the paradigm that considers psychology from its social roots, acknowledging the complex and dynamic relationship between the individual's inner thoughts, feelings and behaviour, and its position on social networks and structures (Iscoe, 1974; Kelly, 1966; Loughry & Eyber, 2003; Sarason, 1974). This finding fuels the debate between what is referred to as 'trauma-focused' and 'psychosocial' approaches (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010), showing that the narrow focus on direct war exposure as the main cause of psychosocial distress should be broadened to the daily living conditions constituting multiple influences on psychosocial well-being. All this lends support, in corroboration of various other studies concerned with the psychosocial well-being of war-affected populations (Betancourt & Khan, 2008; Elbedour, ten Bensel & Bastien, 1993; Inter-agency Standing Committee, 2007; Machel, 2001; Miller et al., 2008, 2010; Stichick, 2001), to an approach whereby the impact of child soldiering is – albeit sufficiently acknowledged – not overemphasized, but balanced by equal attention to both challenges and resources in the aftermath of child soldiering and their effects on psychosocial well-being.

The identified associations between favourable and unfavourable post-child soldiering conditions and former child soldiers' psychosocial well-being are of particular interest, as these constitute modifiable conditions that might be targeted by intervention (Betancourt & Khan, 2008; Loughry & Eyber, 2003; Stichick, 2001; Miller et al., 2008, 2010). In this regard, it is of the utmost importance to tackle unfavourable conditions such as poverty and stigmatization, as these create a proximal and ongoing source of distress for former child soldiers, exhausting their resources and worsening their

psychosocial well-being (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010). Favourable conditions, such as access to school or professional support, should also be stimulated and a supportive environment created upon return from the armed group, as this may deliver resources that strengthen the ability to deal with experienced distress. Applied to the high prevalence and substantial impact of stigmatization, often owing to fear, perceived injustice and vengeance among war-affected populations and resulting in a range of internalizing and externalizing symptoms (Annan et al., 2007; Betancourt et al., 2010; de Jong, 2002; Sansone & Sansone, 2008), interventions should not solely engage the involved parties and address their psychosocial well-being, but entail a contextualized approach to transitional justice by creating a common ground, justice and conciliation, as well as to psychosocial well-being by engendering a broader attitude change and mutual support within the entire community, in order to break the cycle of violence (Hazler, 1996).

This study has possibly unveiled only some of the post-child soldiering conditions associated with psychosocial well-being and therefore calls for further systematic research on the factors that represent sources of both distress and strength, respectively exacerbating and buffering the psychosocial impact of child soldiering in the longer term, so as to promote the psychosocial well-being of former child soldiers.

Information gathered through Interim Care Centres represents a unique and rich data source (Allen & Schomerus, 2006), yet relying on such information implies some important limitations. Given that these centres primarily had a supportive role and operated in a context of high rebel activity and insecurity, procedural inadequacies related to the data collection and conservation may have occurred. The assessment relied upon experience with and locally valued indicators of the concept under study, but is constrained by a limited scope, convenience sampling method and lack of validation studies due to the precarious circumstances. Consequently, not all components of child soldiers' psychosocial well-being, nor all variables potentially affecting this well-being, e.g., structural or macro-factors, could be included in the research design. Moreover, the information on psychological symptoms only covers the prevalence but not the frequency or severity of the symptom. Besides, the participants do not represent a randomized sample, implying non-representativeness of all former child soldiers (Herzog, 1996). Moreover, self-report measures imply a variety of potential response biases, threatening the findings' validity (Pearson, Ross & Dawes, 1994). Finally, a longitudinal research design is needed to capture the non-linear and gradually evolving psychosocial well-being of former child soldiers in the aftermath of a conflict (Williams, 2007).

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4

Challenges faced by former child soldiers in the aftermath of war in northern Uganda*

* Based on Vindevogel, S., De Schryver, M., Broekaert, E., & Derluyn, I. (in press). Challenges faced by former child soldiers in the aftermath of war in Uganda. Journal of Adolescent Health.

> "The problems we experience during the war are too much for us, young boys and girls…"
>
> George | 21 years

Abstract

Warfare takes a profound toll of all layers of society, creating multiple and multilevel challenges that impinge on the psychosocial well-being of affected individuals. This study aims to assess the scope and salience of challenges encountered by former child soldiers and at identifying additional challenges they face compared to non-recruited young people in war-affected northern Uganda.

The study was carried out with a stratified random sample of northern Ugandan adolescents (*n*=1,008), of whom a third had formerly been recruited (*n*=330). The mixed methods comparison design consisted of a constrained free listing task to determine the challenges; a free sorting task to categorize them into clusters; and statistical analysis of their prevalence amongst formerly recruited youth and of how they compare with those of non-recruited youth.

Altogether, 237 challenges were identified and clustered into 15 categories, showing that formerly recruited adolescents mainly identified 'emotional' and 'training and skills'-related challenges. Compared to non-recruited counterparts, they reported significantly more 'emotional' and fewer 'social and relational' challenges, with the exception of stigmatization. Sex, age and school attendance played a major role in their reports.

The challenges confronting formerly recruited youths reach well beyond the effects of direct war-exposure and emerge mainly from multiple influence spheres surrounding them. These challenges are largely shared in common with non-recruited youths. This multidimensional and collective character of challenges calls for comprehensive psychosocial interventions though which healing the psychological wounds of war is complemented by mending the war-affected surroundings at all levels and in all life areas.

4.1 Introduction

War exposes civilians to excessive levels and kinds of violence, which pose a considerable threat to their psychosocial well-being (Barenbaum, Ruchkin, & Schwab-Stone, 2004; Thabet & Vostanis, 2000). Those who are more directly and actively involved in the conflict, such as young people recruited as child soldiers, are likely to experience even more frequent and severe war-related events (Annan, Blattman, & Horton, 2006) and hence more severe psychosocial consequences (Kohrt, Jordans, Tol, Speckman, Maharjan, Worthman et al., 2008). However, considering as critical determinants only the impact of war in general and child soldiering in particular risks overlooking other possible challenges that impinge on former child soldiers' psychosocial well-being (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010; Wessells, 2006). War not only affects individuals but also destabilizes their entire social ecology, by rupturing familial and social networks, disrupting societal institutions and structures, undermining the socio-economic fabric, and eroding culture and morality (Miller & Rasco, 2004; Miller, Fernando, & Berger, 2010; Pedersen, 2002; Summerfield, 1996). In addition to such detrimental conditions indirectly generated or exacerbated by warfare, considerable distress in the aftermath of war may result from challenges unrelated to warfare or the harm it inflicted on affected settings. These include a range of structural and often pre-existing challenges, such as social inequality and chronic poverty, that may even be among the roots of war and, when not sufficiently addressed, account for ongoing psychological distress in its aftermath (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010).

Approaches to the challenges confronting former child soldiers should thus incorporate a range of socio-ecological factors rather than just the individual's direct exposure to warfare and consequent psychosocial harm (Bracken, Giller, & Summerfield, 1995; Rasmussen, Nguyen, Wilkinson, Vundla, Raghavan, Miller et al., 2010). Current research mainly draws on pre-constructed scales, probing for the incidence of a selected set of potentially stressful experiences and conditions (Miller & Rasco, 2004; Rasmussen & Annan, 2009). While valuable, these methods may lead to fragmented images, possibly disregarding the subjective salience of the measured challenges and overlooking other less self-evident but important challenges (Tol, Patel, Tomlinson, Baingana, Galappatti, Panter-Brick, 2011). To grasp this wide variety, inductive methods are needed that allow people to express ideas unbiased and unrestricted by a priori hypotheses on the existence and pertinence of challenges (Barenbaum et al., 2004; Miller & Rasco, 2004; Miller & Rasmussen, 2010; Tol et al., 2011).

Moreover, while it is widely acknowledged that child soldiering may take a particular toll on the lives of formerly recruited adolescents and possibily create additional challenges (Vindevogel, Coppens, Derluyn, De Schryver, Loots, & Broekaert, 2011), studies seldom include a comparison with non-recruited counterparts, limiting the evidential base (Betancourt, Borisova, Rubin-Smith, Fitzmaurice, & Gilman, 2008; Kohrt et al., 2008). The few studies that have included a control group or controlling indicators have hitherto delivered inconsistent findings with regard to psychological symptomathology, social acceptance, education and livelihood (Annan et al., 2006; Annan, Blattman, Carlson, & Mazurana, 2007; Betancourt et al., 2008; Blattman & Annan, 2010; Boothby, 2006; Kohrt et al., 2008; MacMullin & Loughry, 2004; Verhey, 2002; Williamson, 2006).

This study therefore aims to deepen an understanding of the challenges confronting former child soldiers in a war-affected context, more specifically in northern Uganda, a region that endured a two-decade-long conflict during which the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) recruited thousands of children as soldiers. Through inductively creating a contextually valid, locally relevant assessment of challenges, thereby including potential differences between formerly recruited and non-recruited youth, this study addresses the aforementioned shortcomings in research's current state of the art. It also focuses on what has been defined by an interdisciplinary group of academics, policy makers and practitioners as the highest current research priority for mental health and psychosocial support in humanitarian settings, i.e. studying the stressors faced and defined by affected populations (Tol et al., 2011). Such research has hitherto not been systematically conducted, yet it is of fundamental importance for psychosocial programming and policy (Marsden & Strang, 2006). Generating a thorough understanding of potentially distressing factors that are relatively modifiable may contribute to the development of a more comprehensive and therefore effective approach to psychosocial well-being, and eventually to an improved environment for adolescents in war-torn settings (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010; Reifsnider, Gallagher, & Forgione, 2005).

4.2 Method

Challenges encountered in a war-affected context are plural and multifaceted, and are related to individual subjective valuation and the specific socio-cultural context. In order to capture this complex reality, the selected research method consisted of three parts: a free listing task to identify the challenges; a free sorting task to categorize the challenges into clusters; and statistical data analysis. The study design was approved by the

Ethical Committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of Ghent University, as well as by the Resident District Commissioner of Lira district, where the study was carried out.

4.2.1 Phase 1: Inventorying challenges

The first phase of the data collection was undertaken over a three-month period of fieldwork from October to December 2010. To obtain a representative list of challenges, in- and out-of-school adolescents, both recruited and non-recruited and living in various geographical areas, were sampled. Based on the District Education Office's overview of secondary schools in Lira district, six schools (15%), equally divided between urban (*n*=2), peri-urban (*n*=2) and rural (*n*=2) areas, were randomly selected. The age range 12-25 years was determined to include youth that were most likely to be among the young people targeted for recruitment during the LRA insurgency. The best match for the in-school participants were students of secondary school classes Senior 2 and 3 studying for the O-level. None refused to participate, resulting in a sample of 732 in-school participants. For each included school, the two nearest villages were selected. With the assistance of the chairpersons of the community Local Councils (LC1), youths in these areas aged 12-25 years and with no school attendance were invited to participate, leading to a sample of 278 out-of-school participants. Information on possible refusals was missing. The aggregated sample comprised 1010 participants, of whom two were older than 25 years and hence not included in the analysis. Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample are depicted in table 1. A third of the participants (*n*=330, 33%) had been recruited by the LRA, for a median duration of approximately one year (*Mdn*=348.50 days, *M*=564.79 days, *SD*=752.74 days, *range*=1-6570 days). About a third of these former recruits (*n*=113, 35%) had returned before 2003, roughly half (*n*=164, 50%) between 2004 and 2006, and a minority (*n*=50, 15%) later than 2006.

After providing information about the purpose and procedure of the study, as well as opportunities for obtaining further psychosocial support and feedback on the research findings (American Psychological Association, 2010), the written informed assent or consent of the participants and the consent of their principals/LC1 chairpersons were obtained. The in-school participants individually completed a written version of the questionnaire in English (the official language of education), while the researcher and a trained bilingual research assistant remained available for further explanation. For out-of-school participants with limited literacy skills, the questionnaire was in interview format administered orally by the

researcher and simultaneously translated on-site into Lango (the native language of the region) by trained bilingual research assistants (Sabin, Lopes Cardozo, Nackerud, Kaiser, & Varese, 2003). The cross-sectional survey consisted firstly of a socio-demographic questionnaire, which included age, gender, district and location of residence, occupation, religion, household composition, and former child soldiering experiences. Its second component was a free listing task to collect the salient challenges, a method proven to be culturally valid and efficient in Uganda for generating items (Betancourt, Speelman, Onyango, & Bolton, 2009; Bolton & Tang, 2002).

Table 1: Frequencies, percentages and χ^2/t-values of socio-demographic characteristics of the total sample, formerly recruited and non-recruited youth

Variable	**Total sample (*n*=1008)** *n(%)*	**Formerly recruited youth (*n*=330)** *n(%)*	**Non-recruited youth (*n*=677)** *n(%)*	χ^2/t
Sex *(Male)*	548 (54)	201 (61)	346 (51)	8.46**
Age†	16.70 (2.06,12-25)	17.4 (2.31,12-25)	16.54 (1.91,12-24)	3.43***
District residents	665 (66)	225 (68)	440 (65)	0.83
Geographic area				49.24***
Urban	165 (16)	37 (11)	128 (19)	
Peri-urban	452 (45)	118 (36)	334 (50)	
Rural	359 (36)	155 (47)	203 (30)	
IDP-camp	27 (3)	18 (5)	9 (1)	
Co-habitation parents				17.25***
Both	386 (38)	99 (30)	286 (42)	
Mother	236 (23)	82 (25)	154 (23)	
Father	67 (7)	21 (6)	46 (7)	
None	318 (32)	128 (39)	190 (28)	
Co-habitation partner	18 (2)	9 (3)	9 (1)	2.46
Own child(ren)	34 (3)	17 (5)	17 (3)	4.72*
Occupation				1.77
Student	730 (72)	235 (71)	494 (73)	
Farming, bricklaying, sales,…	194 (19)	62 (19)	132 (20)	
None	84 (8)	33 (10)	51 (8)	
Religion				2.84
Catholics	535 (54)	164 (51)	370 (56)	
Protestants	349 (35)	126 (39)	223 (33)	
Other	107 (11)	34 (10)	73 (11)	

†= M(SD,range), * p≤.05; ** p≤;.01; *** p≤.001.

Participants were asked to list up to five items that formed a salient challenge to their well-being ('list five things that make you unhappy in life'). They were explicitly encouraged to select the five most pertinent ones based on the challenges' strain, omitting those challenges that are less significant. The results of this study thus represent the most pertinent challenges, implying that some participants may have experienced more or other challenges than could be reported. Subsequently, all unique challenges were listed and those that were conceptually identical were merged and

rephrased (Miller et al., 2010; Tversky & Kahneman, 1982). This procedure resulted in a composite list of 237 unique challenges, which were all coded numerically for statistical analysis.

4.2.2 Phase 2: Categorizing challenges

The second phase of the data collection was undertaken in May and June 2011. Given the extensive list of challenges generated through the free listing task, their categorization into clusters was required. As the context determines to a certain extent the occurrence and interrelations of these challenges, the task of categorization was assigned to people familiar with the particular context. For this purpose, a group of fifty Ugandan adults were asked to categorize the listed items based on their similarity. The participants were selected from a database of candidates for a research assistant vacancy in a local psychosocial agency. The candidates were considered eligible by virtue of their educational background in social sciences or equivalent working experience, enabling them to make an integrated culturally sensitive analysis of the challenge items. This task was undertaken independently of the selection process. The group comprised 30 (60%) male and 20 (40%) female participants aged between 21 and 33 years old (M=26.20, SD=2.50). The entire free sorting task was conducted individually and occurred in English, taking on average 2 to 3 hours. Following an explanation of the purpose of the research and the preceding free listing task, as well as collecting their informed consents, the participants were asked to read through the list of challenges, to sort similar cards into categories regardless of the number of categories or items in a category, and to label and briefly describe each of the categories.

This mixed methods study was designed to elicit concurrently both qualitative and quantitative data, which were independently analyzed and subsequently integrated to substantiate the categorization of challenges. The qualitative information was thematically analysed by the researcher using Nvivo (QSR International Pty Ltd. Version 9, 2010), a software application for qualitative data-analysis. This exercise generated broad terms covering the clusters' entire content. To analyze the quantitative data, a 237 x 237 co-occurrence matrix was constructed to depict the frequency of item combinations made by the fifty participants. In this matrix, either +0 or +1 was assigned respectively for the absence or presence of a combination of two items in the same category, leading to accumulated cell entries ranging from 0 to 50. The matrix was rescaled by dividing the cell entries by 50 to create a similarity matrix. The matrix was analyzed using

hierarchical cluster analysis (complete linkage) with the statistical software application R.2.11.1 (R Foundation for Statistical Computing, 2008).

The rationale behind the mixed methods design was that each method complements the other to verify the contextual meaningfulness of the generated clusters and to determine appropriate demarcations and labels for the clustered challenges. The quantitative result provided clustering opportunities at different levels, from the highest abstraction level of two clusters to the lowest abstraction level of paired sets of items. A combination of methodological and content arguments, based on respectively the quantitative and qualitative analysis, motivated the decision to consider the mid-level of fifteen clusters to be the most meaningful and robust distinction. The qualitative clusters' labels were compared with the statistical clusters' content and – as these concurred for the greater part – assigned to the clusters. Two qualitative clusters' labels, i.e. 'challenges by natural calamities' and 'challenges of adolescence', did not emerge from the statistical analysis as these items were spread over several clusters. In order to determine the item's within-category centrality and representativeness, the average number of co-occurrences with all other items in the same cluster (a) and the average number of co-occurrences with all items outside that cluster (b) were calculated and subtracted from one another (a-b) (Tversky & Kahneman, 1982). Items with greatest cluster strength are listed for each cluster (table 3). To create the variables of challenge clusters, the number of challenge items per cluster was calculated for each participant (cumulative count). Hereafter, score 0 was retained and scores 1-5 were recoded into score 1 to create binary variables indicating whether a certain challenge cluster was reported by the participant.

4.2.3 Phase 3: Statistical analysis

Statistical chi square analysis of the data enabled exploration of similarities and variations in reported challenge items and clusters among the recruited and non-recruited participants (Bolton & Tang, 2002; Miller et al., 2010). To explore further the associations between the different clusters and the socio-demographic characteristics of the group of former child soldiers, binary logistic regression analysis was applied.

4.3 Results

4.3.1 Item level

A total of 237 challenges was reported, 226 of them by less than 10% of the sample and 11 by between 10% and 24%. The formerly recruited youth listed 166 of these challenges, of which the most common (reported by more than 10%) were in descending order 'poverty in the home, lack of basic requirements' (*n*=88, 27%), 'death of a parent' (*n*=81, 25%), 'being uneducated, out of school, illiterate' (*n*=80, 24%), 'war and all the bad experiences during the conflict' (*n*=75, 23%), 'being sick, injured, disabled; experiencing pain' (*n*=74, 22%), 'lack of schoolfees' (*n*=70, 21%), 'famine, shortage of food, lack of balanced diet' (*n*=56, 17%), 'being insulted/nicknamed by others' (*n*=51, 16%), 'abduction by the LRA' (*n*=40, 12%), and 'criminal acts in society' (*n*=39, 12%). These coincided generally with the most common items in the whole sample. Most challenges that were not reported by formerly recruited adolescents were also infrequently reported by non-recruited participants, implying insignificant differences between these two subsamples, with the exception of the items mentioned in table 2.

Table 2: Frequencies, percentages and χ^2-values of challenge items differently reported by formerly recruited and non-recruited youth

Item	**Formerly recruited youth** *n(%)*	**Non-recruited youth** *n(%)*	χ^2
Death of parent(s)	81 (25)	98 (14)	15.39 ***
Being insulted/nicknamed by others	51 (15)	53 (8)	13.93 ***
Abductions by the LRA	40 (12)	1 (0)	81.44 ***
Having a troublesome relationship with others	21 (6)	75 (11)	5.72 *
Recalling past events ; experiencing flashbacks	20 (6)	14 (2)	10.84 ***
Being beaten by others	13 (4)	56 (8)	6.52 *
Displacement (being a refugee/living in camps)	13 (4)	11 (2)	5.11 *
Death (loss of life)	10 (3)	43 (6)	4.91 *
Being quarrelled with/shouted at	5 (2)	40 (6)	10.03 **
Being lonely/alone	0 (0)	13 (2)	6.42 **

*** $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$.**

Table 3: Frequencies, percentages and χ^2-values of challenge clusters reported by formerly recruited and non-recruited youth

Cluster†	Items (n, r)	Formerly recruited youth *n(%)*	Non-recruited youth *n(%)*	χ^2
Emotional challenges Condolence messages remind me about the killing of people; Bad dreams/nightmares due to war-related experiences; Stories about how relatives/friends have been mistreated by the rebels during captivity; Recalling past events/experiencing flashbacks; Fear because the rebels can attack again	21, 0.42	173 (52)	270 (40)	14.17***
Training and skills-related challenges Poor educational background of the family; Lack of scholastic materials; Being uneducated/out of school/illiterate	6, 0.43	168 (51)	301 (44)	3.71
Economic challenges Lack of money to start up/expand a business; Lack of equipment for working/doing business; Family is suffering due to lack of money; Poverty in the home/lack of basic requirements; Running an unsuccessful business	13, 0.36	144 (44)	266 (39)	1.74
Cultural and societal challenges Bad practices/customs in society; Being severely punished/harshly treated; Child abuse/abuse of children's rights; Human/child sacrifices; People playing with other people's lives	28, 0.21	135 (41)	306 (45)	1.66
War-related living challenges Suffering of people in northern Uganda due to the war; Ongoing rebel activities of the LRA; Displacement (being a refugee/living in camps)	10, 0.65	127 (38)	222 (33)	3.18
Relational and social challenges Not being able to stay with friends/friends not being near me; Feeling disappointed or annoyed by others; Refusal by a girl/boy of my choice; Being laughed at when I fail to do something; Being insulted/nicknamed by others	29, 0.33	112 (34)	276 (41)	4.37*
Caretaking and familial challenges Unequal love/segregation among children by the parents; Lack of parental love and caretaking; Divorce of the parents; Living with a step-parent; Parents refuse to help me with problems/give me advice	28, 0.38	108 (33)	251 (37)	1.83
Educational challenges Missing lessons at school; Suspension from school/denied entry to class; Bullying at school	10, 0.40	69 (21)	146 (22)	0.06
Justice, protection and freedom-related challenges Being taken to court; Arrest/imprisonment by the police; Harsh rules and restrictions/lack of freedom	10, 0.33	57 (17)	133 (20)	0.82
Social services and facilities-related challenges Poor social services/facilities (hospitals, schools, roads, …); Lack of medical care/hospitals; Poor health status in the community; Incompetent doctors and nurses; Poor educational facilities in northern Uganda	17, 0.33	43 (13)	82 (12)	0.17
Behavioural challenges Partying/clubbing all night; Smoking; Addiction to drugs; Drunkenness/alcoholism; Watching bad/destructive movies	20, 0.49	42 (13)	113 (17)	2.68
Political challenges Government officials abusing power; Lack of good leadership/governance; Overtaxation by the government; Political	19, 0.56	35 (11)	61 (9)	0.66

indifference/leaders only minding their own; Lack of government policy to stop early marriage				
Health and development-related challenges	8, 0.30	19 (6)	40 (6)	0.01
Poor accommodation at school/students living in too crowded conditions; Incompetent teachers not teaching children well; Lack of hygiene and taking care of the living environment				
Spiritual challenges	8, 0.60	14 (4)	23 (3)	0.45
People worshipping too many/evil Gods; God does not respond to my prayer; Not being on good terms with God because of what I am doing or what I am failing to do				
Other challenges	10, 0.25	10 (3)	26 (4)	0.42
Not having nice clothes while others have; People going under the water during swimming; Lack of entertainment in life				
None	1, n.a.	1 (0)	2 (0)	-

***†*=Items with greatest cluster strength (5 for large categories, 3 for small categories), * $p \leq .05$; *** $p \leq .001$.**

4.3.2 Cluster level

Since no instructions were placed on the number of categories or on the number of items within a category, these parameters ranged from 2 to 32 categories and from 1 to 164 items per category. The mean similarity between all pairs of items was 0.18, ranging from 0.00 to 0.92. Fifteen clusters of challenges were eventually discerned. The internal similarity of each cluster varied from 0.21 to 0.65, with a mean of 0.40. The mean number of items per cluster was 15.80, with a minimum of 6 and a maximum of 29 items (table 3).

A comparison of prevalence between formerly recruited and non-recruited adolescents showed that most challenge clusters were not differently reported, except that significantly more formerly recruited participants reported emotional challenges while fewer reported relational and social challenges. When exploring these two clusters at the item level (table 2), it appeared that the significantly higher prevalence of emotional challenges among former child soldiers was mainly accounted for by the higher reporting of mourning the death of a parent, abductions by the LRA, and recalling past events. In total, 12 out of the 20 items belonging to this cluster were reported – although not all significantly – by more formerly recruited than non-recruited participants. An exception was the significantly higher reporting of death/loss of life in general among non-recruited adolescents. The significantly higher prevalence of relational and social challenges among non-recruited participants was due to a larger number reporting a troublesome relationship with others, being beaten by others and being lonely/alone. In this cluster, 22 out of the 29 items were reported – although not all significantly – by more non-recruited adolescents. There is, however, an exception to this pattern: being insulted/nicknamed by others was reported significantly more as a challenge by formerly recruited participants.

4.3.3 Regression level

For the group of formerly recruited youth, binary logistic regression analyses investigating the impact of socio-demographic variables on the clusters indicated that the most determining variables were sex, age and school attendance (table 4). Females were roughly twice as likely to report emotional, relational and social, and educational challenges, while males had approximately doubled odds of reporting challenging war-related living conditions and nearly tripled odds of reporting behavioural challenges. Each

one unit increase in age was associated with an increase in odds by roughly a fifth for challenges related to economics, social services and facilities, and a decrease in odds by a fifth for cultural and societal challenges. Moreover, the in-school participants were about 46 times more likely to report educational challenges, approximately 34 times more likely to report behavioural challenges, roughly 9 times more likely to have cultural and societal challenges and around 5 times more likely to report challenges related to justice, protection and freedom. The out-of-school participants were in turn 40% more likely to report challenges related to training and skills and to economic hardship.

Further, participants living in camps had the greatest likelihood of reporting war-related living conditions, followed by participants living respectively far from town and near town, and participants residing in town. Catholic participants were found to have tripled odds of reporting caretaking and familial challenges compared to participants of other religious denominations. Regarding cohabitation with parents, participants living in the absence of the father had approximately doubled odds and participants living with none of the parents had nearly tripled odds of reporting emotional challenges compared to participants living with both parents. Participants living together with their father had a decrease by approximately a third in odds of challenges related to training and skills. With reference to the duration of LRA-captivity, each added day was associated with a decrease in odds by about a fifth of reporting distress linked to social services and facilities. For the duration of the period since returning from the LRA, each added day corresponded with a decrease in odds of reporting emotional challenges as well as health and development-related challenges.

Table 4: Binary logistic regression analyses of socio-demographic variables on challenge clusters reported by formerly recruited youth

Parameter	**Emotional challenges**	**Training and skills-related challenges**	**Economic challenges**	**Cultural and societal challenges**	**War-related living challenges**	**Relational and social challenges**	**Caretaking and familial challenges**	**Educational challenges**	**Justice, protection and freedom-related challenges**	**Social services and facilities-related challenges**	**Behavioural challenges**	**Political challenges**
	Exp(β)	Exp(β)	Exp(β)	Exp(β)	Exp(β)	Exp(β)	Exp(β)	Exp(β)	Exp(β)	Exp(β)	Exp(β)	Exp(β)
Intercept	20.10*	13.64	0.22	4.98	1.90	0.28	0.13	0.00	0.02	0.08	3.09***	0.00**
Sex *(female†)*	0.97	0.71	0.90	1.27	2.12**	0.58*	1.17	0.42*	1.51	1.26	2.80*	1.79
Age	0.97	0.93	1.20**	0.80**	1.00	0.98	0.95	1.15	1.14	1.23**	1.19	1.16
Location of residence *(camp†)*††	*5.08*	*3.20*	*5.82*	*3.56*	*9.76**	*5.44*	*3.70*	*0.40*	-	*5.00*	*4.54*	*1.00*
Village far from town	0.38	0.87	0.42	1.04	0.25*	2.61	1.73	1.06	-	0.33	3.46	2.36
Village near town	0.28	0.80	0.35	1.79	0.18**	1.93	2.08	1.22	-	0.49	4.90	2.10
Town	0.25	0.41	0.71	1.12	0.16**	3.94	0.98	0.82	-	0.12	8.58	1.54
School *(no†)*	1.27	0.44**	0.42**	8.94***	1.13	1.49	0.86	45.6***	4.93**	0.51	34.47**	1.88
Religion *(other)*††	*1.17*	*2.47*	*1.72*	*2.30*	*3.43*	*2.13*	*6.70**	*0.90*	*5.91**	*1.38*	*2.21*	*1.10*
Catholic	0.68	1.79	0.72	0.51	0.52	0.63	3.35*	1.16	0.48	0.67	0.59	0.76
Protestant	0.63	1.40	0.98	0.56	0.73	0.54	2.61	1.12	3.05	1.03	0.41	0.55
Parents *(none)*††	*11.03**	*7.64*	*0.43*	*3.45*	*3.75*	*0.87*	*1.25*	*2.40*	*1.03*	*6.81*	*0.49*	*2.62*
With no parents	2.69**	1.05	1.03	0.97	0.61	0.90	1.19	0.72	0.55	0.66	1.20	0.46
Only with father	1.77	0.30*	1.23	1.84	0.42	0.95	1.01	0.68	0.58	2.53	1.38	0.78
Only with mother	2.34*	1.36	0.90	1.60	0.78	1.22	1.45	0.52	0.58	0.44	0.90	0.75
Duration captivity *(log)*	0.92	0.94	0.97	0.97	1.06	1.03	1.01	0.92	0.94	0.83*	1.12	1.09
Duration return	0.86**	0.93	1.00	1.06	1.04	1.08	1.07	1.07	0.94	0.95	1.05	1.01
AIC	425.70	442.02	431.73	388.25	419.75	417.30	414.03	297.18	292.11	248.29	232.52	232.56

Clusters 'health and development' and 'spiritual' challenges contain too few respondents to construct a binary logistic regression model with adequate fit; for cluster 'justice, protection and freedom-related challenges' no stable fit could be obtained when including the variable 'location of residence'. † reference category; †† χ^2; *p≤.05, **p≤.01, ***p≤.001.

4.4 Discussion

This study aimed to assess the most pertinent challenges confronting formerly recruited youths in comparison with non-recruited youths in northern Uganda. The results reveal that former child soldiers and other adolescents in northern Uganda feel challenged by a myriad of living conditions and experiences. Most challenges were equally reported, showing large parity between formerly recruited and non-recruited young people.

Only a few noteworthy differences between formerly recruited and non-recruited participants appeared. Emotional challenges related to war exposure were significantly more and most prevalently reported by formerly recruited youths, indicating that emotional distress constitutes a prior source of concern (Blatmann & Annan, 2010; Miller & Rasco, 2004). This may have ensued from increased exposure to warfare and consequent psychological distress, as indicated by previous research (Annan et al., 2006; Kohrt et al., 2008). Although the passage of time seemed to ease this emotional burden, this finding points to the long-lasting psychological impact of war on former child soldiers (Blattman & Annan, 2010; Boothby, 2006; Ghobarah, Huth, & Russett, 2003; Kohrt et al., 2008; Pedersen, 2002), especially on those whose parents were not available (Ager, 2006; Derluyn, Broekaert, Schuyten, & De Temmerman, 2004; MacMullin & Loughry, 2004). Females tended to report more emotional challenges, while males reported more behavioural challenges, in line with generally observed gendered tendencies in internalizing and externalizing symptoms (Leadbeater, Kuperminc, Blatt, & Hertzog, 1999). Secondly, formerly recruited participants reported fewer relational and social challenges, with the exception of stigmatization. Although these challenges constituted a major concern to one third of the formerly recruited participants, many of them rather reported challenges that tend to affect them more 'directly' and hence to be perceived as more distressing (e.g., emotional challenges). Social relationships are often regarded as fulfilling a facilitating and mediating role, implying that related challenges tend to impact not so directly on the individual's resources (Hobfoll, 1989). Stigmatization may here be an exception, for it more directly affects resources (e.g., self-esteem), and can be perceived as a salient psychological threat. If the 'direct' challenges are experienced to a lesser extent, these rather 'indirect' relational and social issues may come more to the fore, which might have been the case for non-recruited youth. Females' increased likelihood of relational and social challenges conforms with the general observation that social integration is

often even more challenging for female former child soldiers (McKay & Mazurana, 2004).

All other challenges confronting former child soldiers were shared in common with other young people living in this war-torn area, possibly illustrating that warfare had a deleterious impact on the core social fabric and on the physical, social, educational, economic and political dimensions of their lives. Among the highest communally reported challenges were educational and economic challenges. Participants reported the lack of training and skills and economic hardship as pertinent challenges. Such challenges are a major problem for former child soldiers in many war-affected areas and may weigh profoundly on their psychosocial well-being (Betancourt et al., 2008; Blattman & Annan, 2010; Wessells, 2006). However, the impoverished economic context of northern Uganda renders these economic challenges a source of concern for every adolescent, especially when excluded from the education system. This context tends to limit productive activities and income generation, often leading to situations of poverty (Wessells, 2006). This situation particularly worried older and out-of-school former child soldiers in this study, who are expected to begin earning their own living. Those attending school, however, also reported a range of educational challenges, albeit to a lesser extent. Education was, furthermore, found to be related to a range of cultural and societal practices hampering social acceptance and participation; to behavioural challenges that threaten the individual's or community's well-being; and to the importance of justice, protection and freedom-related challenges. That these issues were more pertinent for in-school participants may reflect the school-induced discourse that informs their thinking and judgments in given situations (Van Dijk, 1989).

Moreover, a considerable range of familial and domestic challenges related to loss, incapacitation or unavailability of caretaking was reported, albeit not differently by formerly recruited and non-recruited participants. This might be due to war's devastating impact on family structures and functioning, which is inflicted on all affected families (Ager, 2006). Other challenges originated from the harsh living conditions and extreme suffering of people that resulted from the long-lasting and intense armed conflict. These challenges are also attributable to the enduring threat of renewed war violence arising from the shortcomings of the official cessation of war. This was particularly the case for males and those living in remote areas. These challenges testify to the profound impact of warfare on the lives of formerly recruited adolescents growing up in this war-torn area, which they experience as distressing even five years after the last recorded LRA-activity in Uganda. Harsh living conditions might also be created by

inadequate social services and facilities, which may threaten individuals' health and development. Such inadequacy was considered here to be more challenging the longer the captivity and the older the person, conditions that may a generate greater need for 'external' support outside the primary network. Unfortunately, according to the participants' reports, national and international bodies often fail to provide the necessary support for the civilians or favourable conditions for healthy development (Wessells, 2006). Further, laws set at the societal level can be either too stringent and therefore restrict freedom, or absent and hence fail to provide protection against crime. Political power is reported often to be misused through abuse of authority or a failure to fulfil responsibilities. Certain prevailing spiritual beliefs and practices in society were also reported by the participants as threatening. While religion mostly operates as a resource, extreme ideology or the violation of religious tenets may be experienced as distressing (Wessells & Strang, 2006).

Despite the importance that the participants assign to these macro-level influences, they have seldom been included in scientific analyses of variables influencing former child soldiers' psychosocial well-being (Kohrt et al., 2008). Neglecting the myriad intersections between individual and collective processes in the understanding and response to challenges decontextualizes these challenges from the social fabric on which the individual's psychosocial well-being so strongly depends. There is need to acknowledge the growing body of evidence that conceptualizes war and child soldiering as mass casualties, inflicting challenges on a systemic level that branch down to challenges for individuals (Hobfoll, Horsey, & Lamoureux, 2009; Tol, Jordans, Reis, & de Jong, 2009).

This analysis has shown the large similarity between formerly recruited and non-recruited young people's challenges, which points to their communal nature. The reported challenges can be situated both on the individual level and in multiple influence spheres of the social milieu surrounding the individual, and that they include a mixture of factors resulting directly from exposure to warfare, the destitute environmental conditions for human development that it has amplified, and structural factors that shape the stressful context of daily life in its aftermath. The multi-level and complex nature of challenges calls for integrated, multi-layered policy, research and practice approaches and support systems (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2007). This multi-level and multi-sectoral nature of challenges also implies that the focus on healing individual psychological wounds of war should be complemented by efforts to mend the war-affected surroundings at all social ecological levels and in all life domains (Ager, Boothby, & Bremer, 2009; Miller & Rasco, 2004). Such approaches convey

the idea the interventions should cover multiple sectors and levels of the context on a continuum of support that is primarily oriented towards the entire population and their communal processes, and subsidiary to more specialized kinds of support to individual processes.

This study indicates that the challenges reported by formerly recruited adolescents are clearly representative of those reported by all adolescents in the study. This conclusion refers to the pertinence of challenges, but does not reveal information about the extent of those encountered. Besides, despite the wide range of times in captivity, this was generally not significantly associated with differential reporting of challenges by formerly recruited youths. However, the extent and severity of war exposure should be regarded as potentially affecting reports of challenges by formerly recruited participants (Blattman & Annan, 2010). The study might further be limited by the context-specific nature of the data, representing the particular reality of northern Uganda. However, through the accumulation of evidence collected in different contexts, cross-cutting key principles may arise that engender a better understanding of challenges encountered in war-torn settings (Stark, Boothby, & Ager, 2008). Although this study mainly focuses on challenges, it is part of a larger research that incorporates the importance of the dynamic interplay between challenges and resources. This study may hence be regarded as an initial step in unpacking the complex reality lived by formerly recruited adolescents (Marsden & Strang, 2006). It should be noted that even though based on a sound methodology and thorough analysis, the created clusters are somewhat artificial and should be regarded and approached as being imprecise representations of reality, which is a defining feature of any effort at categorization.

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5

Dealing with the consequences of war: resources for former child soldiers in northern Uganda*

* Based on Vindevogel, S., Wessells, M., De Schryver, M., Broekaert, E., & Derluyn, I. (submitted). Dealing with the consequences of war: resources for former child soldiers in northern Uganda.

"In the thicket of trauma, pain, and trouble, you can see blooms of hope and transformation."

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Abstract

This manuscript explores resources that help formerly recruited young people in dealing with war-related adversity and its subsequent challenges. Self-reports on the most pertinent resources were collected from 1,008 northern Ugandan youth (age 12 to 25 years), of whom 330 had formerly been recruited by the Lord's Resistance Army. Based on the conceptual framework developed by the Psychosocial Working Group, the reported sources and processes of support were thematically clustered and quantitatively analyzed with an eye toward identifying differences compared to their non-recruited counterparts. This study identified a range of human, social and cultural resources, with little difference between both groups. Religious beliefs, social support and mental health resources were most frequently reported by former child soldiers. The results further demonstrate resource exchange on the intersection between individual and communal processes. This study suggests that it is important to build on these resources in interventions that aim to support former child soldiers in the aftermath of armed conflict.

5.1 Introduction

Worldwide, armed conflicts and political violence cause extensive physical and psychological harm to children (Barenbaum, Ruchkin, & Schwab-Stone, 2004; Williams, 2007). Defined under international law as people under 18 years of age, children typically comprise over half of the population of war-affected countries (Richman, 1993; Wessells & Edgerton, 2008). Living in war zones, children and their families may be directly targeted by armed groups as a means of terrorizing the population, and subjected to multiple, interacting risks such as family separation, displacement, losses of home and loved ones, sexual violence and exploitation, dangerous labor, and HIV/AIDS, among others (Boothby, Strang, & Wessells, 2006b). These stressors add to and compound the chronic poverty and structural violence that pervade many war zones (Collier, Elliot, Herge, Hoeffler, Reynal-Querol, & Sambanis, 2003; Wessells & Kostelny, 2012).

An important sub-group of war-affected children are child soldiers, that is, children who have been recruited by or associated with armed forces or armed groups. Although hard facts regarding the number of child soldiers globally are unavailable, there is ample evidence that children are systematically recruited and used by armed forces and armed groups worldwide (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2008; United Nations General Assembly Security Council, 2012). The psychosocial impacts of child soldiering are profound owing to the systematic exposure to attacks and extreme violence, which may lead to relatively high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression among formerly recruited children (Derluyn, Broekaert, Schuyten, & De Temmerman, 2004; Dickson-Gomez, 2002; Klasen, Oettingen, Daniels, Post, Hoyer, & Adam, 2010; Kohrt, Jordans, Tol, Speckman, Maharjan, Worthman et al., 2008).

However, the psychosocial impact of child soldiering arises also from everyday distresses (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010). Even following a ceasefire and the implementation of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programs, formerly recruited children experience the stresses related to stigma, fear of reprisal attack, deprivation of education, joblessness and lack of livelihood, and inability to meet basic needs (Vindevogel, De Schryver, Broekaert, & Derluyn, in press). Particularly in rural areas of sub-Saharan Africa, former child soldiers may experience spiritual distress and may see themselves as being contaminated by angry spirits that have the power to harm them and anyone whom they contact (Wessells & Monteiro, 2004).

Overall, the psychosocial literature on former child soldiers is characterized by a deficits approach that emphasizes the suffering and problems they face

(Annan, Brier, & Aryemo, 2009; Werner, 2012). This deficits emphasis has been visible in media images, some of which have attempted to portray former child soldiers as a 'Lost Generation' who are beyond repair. In contrast to these grim images, diverse analysts have noted that many formerly recruited children manage to function well despite their wartime experiences and considerable challenges in war's aftermath (Betancourt, Borisova, Williams, Brennan, Whitfield, de la Soudiere et al., 2010; Boothby, Crawford & Halperin, 2006; Cortes & Buchanan, 2007; Dowdney, 2007; Klasen et al., 2010; Veale, 2010; Wessells, 2006b, 2009). In this regard, many of them exhibit remarkable resilience, which has been defined in terms of stress resistance, reasonably good functioning in the face of adversity, and recovery or positive transformation (Kaplan, 2005; Layne, Beck, Rimmasch, Southwick, Moreno, & Hobfoll, 2009; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Masten & Obradovic, 2008; Rutter, 2006). In regard to programming, a resilience focus has encouraged less singular attention to deficits and has engendered a resource-based approach that emphasizes the individual and social resources that enable children's well-being (Hobfoll, 2002). According to Hobfoll (2002, p. 307), resources are "those entities that either are centrally valued in their own right (e.g., self-esteem, close attachments, health, and inner peace), or act as a means to obtain centrally valued ends (e.g., money, social support, and credit)."

Previous research has consistently supported the view that the availability of resources facilitates an individual's resilience in the wake of significant adversity (Caplan, 1974; Kelly, 1966; Sarason, 1974). The resources that have previously been identified as helping young people to deal with war-related and post-war challenges include a range of individual characteristics such as cognitive appraisal (Boothby, Crawford et al., 2006; Klasen et al., 2010), affect regulation (Cortes & Buchanan, 2007), meaning making of experiences (Annan et al., 2009), individual temperament (Kostelny, 2006; Wessells, 2006b), and creativity (Punamaki, Qouta, & El-Sarraj, 2001). Besides, a multitude of resources are found to emanate from the social, material and cultural context, for instance emotional support (Annan et al., 2009; Kostelny, 2006), caregiving figures (Cortes & Buchanan, 2007; Punamaki et al., 2001; Santacruz & Arana, 2002), collective meaning-making discourses (McEvoy-Levy, 2006), protection and safety (Ager, 2006), education (Arafat & Musleh, 2006; Wessells, 2006b), and religion (Maeland, 2010; Wessells & Strang, 2006). The multilevel origin of resources encourages a social ecological approach that considers individual development in the context of interrelated settings and relationships (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Boothby, Strang et al., 2006; Miller & Rasco, 2004).

However, previous research has also pointed to the devastating impact of warfare on resources, encompassing multifaceted and multilevel disruption of political, social, health, economic and cultural dimensions of life (Boothby, Strang et al., 2006; Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2007; Wisner & Adams, 2002). This may lead to considerable downfall and even scarcity of resources, which possibly affects the ability and readiness to propound or share resources within affected communities. This might particularly concern former child soldiers, since previous research showed that support for them is in war-affected settings often considered 'a reward for perpetrators of atrocities', especially when other victims are left unattended (Blattman & Annan, 2008). In addition, the finding that formerly recruited children are likely to be stigmatized may indicate that they possibly experience larger social exclusion, leading to reduced access to opportunities and support, and eventually contributing to further vulnerability and marginalization (Betancourt et al., 2010; Blattman & Annan, 2008). Such social dynamics could jeopardize formerly recruited youth's access to support, and therefore it is plausible that they hold significantly different resources and in particular less communal socio-cultural resources compared to non-recruited young people.

This chapter analyzes the resources of former child soldiers and differences in resources compared to their non-recruited counterparts, using the conceptual framework of the Psychosocial Working Group (PWG, 2002) which was a collaboration between diverse academic and practitioner agency partners. This framework is useful because it integrates the insights from two valuable, complementary approaches to understanding psychosocial well-being—resource-based approaches (Hobfoll, 2002) and social ecological approaches to child development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)—and applies to diverse cultural contexts.

The PWG framework identifies three core domains as spaces where resources may be marshaled. The first domain is human capacity, which consists of physical and mental health, knowledge and skills, and livelihoods of individuals. The second domain is the social ecology, which includes supportive resources at multiple levels of the social environment (Boothby, Strang et al., 2006; Dawes & Donald, 2000; Hobfoll, 1998; Masten, 2007; Miller & Rasco, 2004) and consists of social connectedness and relationships, social support, and social service and infrastructure existing in a community or society. The third domain is culture and prevailing values, which includes cultural practices, human rights, and religious beliefs of the people. This corroborates other resource-based ecological theories, stating that resources encompass both psychological (e.g., coping strategies)

and socio-cultural aspects (e.g., social support) (Hobfoll, 2002; Sarason & Lorentz, 1979).

The PWG framework envisions significant dynamism and interaction across these three domains. Indeed, processes of mobilization, negotiation and exchange of resources across the domains enable the resilience of a system and its members (Boothby, Strang et al., 2006; Hobfoll, 1998; Psychosocial Working Group, 2002). In response to the demands brought forth by a threat or alteration in resources, individuals and their environment tend to engage in processes that lead to conservation, restoration or transformation of their resources (Hobfoll, 2010; Psychosocial Working Group, 2002). This enables them to better address the challenges in their situation. For instance, social networks may contribute to sustain the livelihoods of individuals facing economic challenges; cultural practices may be drawn on to reinstate social connectedness in the wake of divisive war strategies; and individuals may seek support in a religious framework to cope with experienced distress (Boothby, Strang et al., 2006; Psychosocial Working Group, 2002).

The purpose of this study is to analyze the resources that help formerly recruited young people to deal with challenges in the wake of child soldiering and that hence may contribute to their resilience. The study takes a contextually grounded, participatory approach of eliciting ideas about supportive resources from former child soldiers in specific and war-affected young people in general. This elicitive approach fits with the need for culturally sensitive analysis (Freitas & Downey, 1998) and contrasts with the often used approach wherein resources or protective factors are predefined, usually by adults. Also, the elicitive approach provides a means of learning from and giving voice to formerly recruited youth, who in many settings are marginalized and voiceless (Wessells, 2006b). A distinctive aspect of the study is its comparison of the resources of formerly recruited participants and their non-recruited counterparts. Most extant research on child soldiers has not used comparison groups, which are essential for identifying differences across subgroups of war-affected children and for unveiling potential barriers to the access and use of resources (Blattman & Annan, 2010). Such knowledge may inform the programming of interventions that aim to facilitate resilient responses to child soldiering by strengthening resources and dealing with extant barriers. Comparison studies may also generate knowledge on the incremental impact of child soldiering and may therefore strengthening the weak evidence base in the field (Blattman & Annan, 2010).

5.2 Method

5.2.1 Participants

Northern Uganda has been the hotbed of a two-decades-long armed conflict involving numerous civilian casualties, among whom are thousands of child soldiers (Allen, 2006). This study included a mixture of urban, peri-urban, and rural sites in Lira district. Lira district is of interest in part because it was a site of systematic abductions of children by the so called Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) following its expansion of the war into the northeast in 2003. In the wake of the cessation of hostilities agreement in 2006, this area is still undergoing a transition from over two decades of violence toward peace, which requires children's well-being to break cycles of violence (Bayer, Klasen, & Adams, 2007).

The participants were young men and women between the ages of 12 and 25 years. The extension of the upper age limit beyond 18 years allowed to reach young people who had been with the LRA and/or were affected by the armed conflict while under 18 years. All participants provided written informed consent or assent. Pursuing consent from legally authorized representatives for minors was an obstacle due to several practical constraints, including separated living and remote residence of the primary caretakers. Also, their principals/Local Council 1 Chairpersons and the District Commissioner of Lira gave approval for the study, the design of which had been approved by the Ethical Committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of Ghent University.

The study included a mixture of in-school and out-of-school young people. Based on the District Education Office's overview of secondary schools in Lira district, six schools (15%) equally divided over urban (n=2), peri-urban (n=2) and rural (n=2) areas were randomly selected. All students of classes Senior 2 and 3 of the lower secondary O-level were invited to participate, of whom none refused. This resulted in a sample of 732 in-school participants. For each included school, the two villages nearest to the school were selected. With assistance of the Local Council 1's Chairpersons, youth in these areas who met the criteria of 12-25 years and no school attendance were invited to participate. This led to a sample of 278 out-of-school participants; information on possible refusals is missing. The aggregated sample comprised 1010 participants, of whom two were older than 25 years and hence were excluded from the analysis. Approximately one third (n=330) of them has been recruited by the Lord's Resistance Army.

5.2.2 Procedure

Two measures were used for each participant. The first was a socio-demographic questionnaire that collected information about the participant's age, gender, district and location of residence, occupation, religion, household composition, and former child soldiering experiences. The second was a free listing task in which participants were asked to 'list five things that help you in dealing with difficulties'. This wording was carefully designed by the bicultural research team to insure ease of understanding and likelihood of inviting participants to identify the most important resources that they actually use. No attempt was made to have the participants list exhaustively so as to avoid elicitation of less relevant resources, nor to rank order the items they generated. The free-listing method itself has proven to be culturally valid and efficient for generating items in Uganda (Betancourt, Speelman, Onyango, & Bolton, 2009; Bolton & Tang, 2002; Miller, Fernando, & Berger, 2010).

The data were collected October-December, 2010. The data collection was unguided by explicit a priori instruction or reference to the theoretical framework. This procedure allowed free elicitation of all the helpful factors and processes impinging on individuals. It also valued the participants' subjective evaluation of resources rather than the objectively identified role these play in achieving resilient outcomes (Neuner, 2010), and thus allowed them to identify those resources that are most important to them in their lives (Miller et al., 2010).

The in-school participants administered individually a written version of the free listing task in English (official language of education), while the researcher and a trained bilingual research assistant remained available for further explication. For out-of-school participants with low levels of literacy, the questions were administered verbally in English by the researcher and simultaneously translated on-site in Lango (native language of region) by trained bilingual research assistants. The research assistants received a training on the purpose of the study and how to apply its methods in an appropriate, ethical manner. During the training, rules were made concerning how to translate the free-listing question to the participants, thereby reducing variability during the translation procedure (Sabin, Lopes Cardozo, Nackerud, Kaiser, & Varese, 2003).

5.2.3 Analysis

5.2.3.1 Qualitative analysis

A cumulative number of 4,132 resources were reported by the participants. The first phase of qualitative analysis was to identify, merge, and comprehensively rephrase resources that were conceptually identical (e.g., 'teamwork' and 'forming groups to do cooperative work'). This procedure resulted in a composite list of 258 unique resources.

These resources were categorized into the PWG conceptual framework's resource domains (human capital, social ecologies, and culture and values) and its preliminary sub-domains. Since the initial work by the PWG did not include an attempt to identify sub-domains in a comprehensive manner, it was necessary to generate new sub-domains and clusters that captured the meaning of the data. To promote inter-rater reliability, two raters independently categorized the resources using the PWG's conceptual domains and its sub-domains. This initial categorization resulted in a high degree of homogeneity, whereby discrepancies were systematically situated on intersections of indistinctively defined sub-domains, such as social connectedness and social support. Consensus was thus obtained through discussing the (sub-)domains' content and boundaries, deviation and interrelation with other domains, and centrality in the conceptual framework. This process contributed to the reliability of the data analysis and led to an enrichment of the initial PWG conceptual framework.

As a subsequent step, the listed resources were thematically analyzed to identify possible exchange processes of resources between the three core domains that envision the resilience of a system. Driven by the PWG-framework that theorizes this dynamism, the resources that implied or expresses interconnection and transaction were allocated to one of the cross-cutting themes representing a relationship between two or three of the core resource domains. This analysis thus mainly occurred on a semantic or explicit level whereby the themes represent the content of the data patterns, yet some underlying features of the context enabling the individual accounts were conceptualized (Braun & Clarcke, 2006).

5.2.3.2 Quantative analysis

The resource items were coded numerically and allocated to the resource (sub-)domains. Since the proportion of the total number of listed resources in each (sub-)domain correlated highly (r=0.99) with the proportion of respondents listing these, the resource (sub-)domains were transformed

into dichotomous variables that represent whether respondents reported one or more of the included resource items instead of 1 to 5 of the resource items. Descriptive statistics were then used to determine the allocation of the categorized resources over the resource domains, sub-domains and clusters, and to explore patterns of resources in these categories. Chi square analysis of the data allowed exploration of similarities and variations in reported resources across the participants of this study, and to make comparisons between formerly recruited and non-recruited participants. Because this is an exploratory study, alpha was set at a lenient level of 0.05 as threshold for significance.

5.3 Results

5.3.1 Socio-demographic characteristics

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample

Variable	**Total sample** (*n*=1008)	**Formerly recruited youth** (*n*=330)	**Non-recruited youth** (*n*=677)	χ^2/t
Sex *(Male)*	548 (54)	201 (61)	346 (51)	8.46**
Age†	16.70 (2.06,12-25)	17.4 (2.31,12-25)	16.54 (1.91,12-24)	3.43***
District residents	665 (66)	225 (68)	440 (65)	0.83
Geographic area				49.24***
Urban	165 (16)	37 (11)	128 (19)	
Peri-urban	452 (45)	118 (36)	334 (50)	
Rural	359 (36)	155 (47)	203 (30)	
IDP-camp	27 (3)	18 (5)	9 (1)	
Co-habitation parents				17.25***
Both	386(38)	99 (30)	286 (42)	
Mother	236 (23)	82 (25)	154 (23)	
Father	67(7)	21 (6)	46 (9)	
None	318(32)	128 (39)	190 (28)	
Co-habitation partner	18 (2)	9 (3)	9 (1)	2.46
Own child(ren)	34 (3)	17 (5)	17 (3)	4.72*
Occupation				1.77
Student	730 (72)	235 (71)	494 (73)	
Farming, bricklaying, shopkeeping,…	194 (19)	62 (19)	132 (20)	
None	84 (8)	33 (10)	51 (8)	
Religion				2.84
Catholics	535 (54)	164 (51)	370 (56)	
Protestants	349(35)	126 (39)	223 (33)	
Other	107 (11)	34 (10)	73 (11)	

n(%); †=M(SD,range); * p≤.05; ** p≤.01; *** p≤.001.

Table 1 presents the socio-demographic characteristics of the sample including recruited and non-recruited young people. Nearly one-third of the participants (*n*=330, 33%) had been recruited by the Lord's Resistance Army, for a median duration of approximately 1 year (*Mdn*=348.50 days, *M*=564.79 days, *SD*=752.74 days, *range*=1-6,570 days). A third of the formerly recruited young people (*n*=113, 35%) had returned before 2003, approximately half (*n*=164, 50%) between 2004 and 2006, and a minority (*n*=50, 15%) later than 2006.

The results are presented separately for the quantitative data, which illuminate the most widely reported items and domains, and the qualitative data, which provide a more holistic picture of the reported use of resources across different domains.

5.3.2 Resource (sub-)domains

Table 2 gives an overview of the resource (sub-)domains and newly recreated sub-domains (designated by asterisks), working definitions and the most prevalent resource as an example.

The distribution of resources across domains and sub-domains identified by formally recruited youth and by youth who had not been recruited is shown in table 3. Overall, the sub-domains reported most by the participants were religious beliefs, social support, and mental health. The ten most commonly reported specific resource clusters were, in order of frequency: (1) praying and worship (*n*=603); (2) receiving non-material support (*n*=348); (3) demanding non-material support (*n*=257); (4) productivity (*n*=224); (5) seeking relaxation (*n*=212); (6) guidance and counseling (*n*=216); (7) education (*n*=180); (8) company (*n*=171); (9) cultural values (*n*=120); and (10) basic requirements, monetary and material (*n*=89). Of these, the only item for which there was significant difference between former child soldiers and the non-recruited youth is 'guidance and counseling'.

Table 2: Identified domains and subdomains of resources

Domains and subdomains	Description	Example
Human capacities	***Resources endowed to individuals***	
Mental health	Psychological well-being	Reading books or magazines to relax my mind
Physical health	Physical well-being	Having food and good, balanced feeding
Knowledge and skills	Theoretical or practical abilities	Being productive (looking for/doing a job)
Livelihood	Means of securing income and assets to meet basic needs	Saving money to pay school fees or help parents pay school fees
Personal values*	Subjective ideals and beliefs	Being a hard working person
Social ecology	***Resources emanating from the social environment***	
Social connectedness	Relationships people have with others and the benefits these involve	Being in a club/good and cooperative group of people
Social support	Deliberate social engagement to help in the social network	Consulting other people to get advice
Social service and infrastructure	Public facilities to promote social and human welfare	Being at school
Social support/social service & infrastructure*	Support provided both by social networks and social service & infrastructure	Receiving advice/guidance and counseling from other people or organizations
Safety*	Peacefulness and harmlessness of the living environment	Living in a peaceful, safe area
Law and order*	Laws and security guidelines set to promote order	Laws, rules and regulations being set
Culture and values	***Resources emanating from the cultural and moral frameworks***	
Cultural practices	Traditional values and practices inherently developed within the specific culture	Leaders meeting to find solutions for community and family disputes
Religious beliefs	Values and practices derived from a specific religion	Prayers
Human Rights	Fundamental rights to which human beings are entitled	Action taken against the abuse of children's rights
Periphery	***Broader macro-context***	
Economic climate	Mood of the global economy of the region	Reduction of government taxes
Political climate	Mood of the politics of the region	Actions ending the war, bringing political stability

***new subcategory**

Table 3: Prevalence of resource domains and sub-domains for formerly recruited and non-recruited adolescents

Resource (sub-)domains and clusters	**Items** *n(%)*	**Formerly recruited youth** *n(%)†*	**Non-recruited youth** *n(%)†*	X^2
Human capacity	**98 (38)**	**214 (65)**	**460 (68)**	**0.96**
Mental health	54 (21)	114 (35)	282 (42)	4.70*
Seeking relaxation	15 (6)	61 (18)	151 (22)	1.95
Avoid/flee confrontation	7 (3)	12 (4)	42 (6)	2.88
Controlling/regulating attention to triggers	3 (1)	12 (4)	35 (5)	1.17
Controlling/regulating emotions	4 (2)	11 (3)	17 (3)	0.56
Controlling/regulating thoughts	5 (2)	9 (3)	19 (3)	0.01
Being optimistic/courageous	6 (2	9 (3)	33 (5)	2.56
Being careful/self-care	6 (2)	7 (2)	23 (3)	1.25
Addressing the issue	3 (1)	7 (2)	10 (1)	0.56
Accepting situation	5 (2)	2 (1)	4 (1)	0.00
Knowledge & skills	11 (4)	87 (26)	164 (24)	0.54
Productivity	2 (1)	80 (24)	144 (21)	1.13
Successful performance	6 (2)	6 (2)	12 (2)	0.00
Problem-solving	3 (1)	1 (0)	8 (1)	1.93
Personal values	11 (4)	35 (11)	73 (11)	0.01
Livelihood	16 (6)	29 (9)	47 (7)	1.08
Having assets	7 (3)	16 (5)	15 (2)	5.15*
Generating income	6 (2)	8 (2)	19 (3)	0.12
Protecting livelihood	3 (1)	7 (2)	13 (2)	0.05
Physical health	6 (2)	20 (6)	38 (6)	0.08
Social ecology	**117 (45)**	**307 (93)**	**614 (91)**	**1.55**
Social support	30 (12)	190 (58)	394 (58)	0.04
Receiving non-material support	13 (5)	120 (36)	228 (34)	0.71
Demanding non-material support	4 (2)	81 (25)	176 (26)	0.25
Demanding material support	2 (1)	20 (6)	46 (7)	0.20
Cooperation	7 (3)	19 (6)	27 (4)	1.59
Giving material support	1 (0)	3 (1)	14 (2)	1.80
Giving non-material support	1 (0)	3 (1)	8 (1)	0.15
Receiving material support	2 (1)	0 (0)	3 (0)	1.47
Social connectedness	28 (11)	111 (34)	228 (34)	0.00
Company	6 (2)	61 (18)	110 (16)	0.79
Sharing	6 (2)	28 (8)	57 (8)	0.00
Sustaining network	5 (2)	25 (8)	57 (8)	0.21
Extending network	7 (3)	18 (5)	38 (6)	0.01
Appreciation	4 (2)	2 (1)	6 (1)	0.22
Social support/Social service & infrastructure	4 (2)	109 (33)	184 (27)	3.68
Guidance and counseling	1 (0)	88 (27)	128 (19)	7.93**
Basic requirements (monetary and material)	1 (0)	29 (9)	60 (9)	0.00
Food and farming requirements	1 (0)	2 (1)	8 (1)	0.75
School fees and requirements	1 (0)	1 (0)	1 (0)	0.27
Social service & infrastructure	44 (17)	98 (30)	175 (26)	1.66
Education	7 (3)	64 (19)	116 (17)	0.77
Health care	8 (3)	21 (6)	41 (6)	0.04
Protection / law & order	5 (2)	19 (6)	26 (4)	1.91
Development	8 (3)	10 (3)	22 (3)	0.04
Special care	5 (2)	6 (2)	3 (0)	4.74
Skills training	5 (2)	2 (1)	8 (1)	0.75

Livelihood	1 (0)	2 (1)	4 (1)	0.00
Sensitization	3 (1)	2 (1)	3 (0)	0.12
Leisure facilities	2 (1)	1 (0)	2 (0)	0.00
Safety	5 (2)	11 (3)	10 (1)	3.74
Law & order	6 (2)	9 (3)	16 (2)	0.12
Laws and regulations	4 (2)	9 (3)	13 (2)	0.68
Security guidelines and services	2 (1)	0 (0)	3 (0)	1.47
Culture & values	**38 (15)**	**224 (68)**	**461 (68)**	**0.01**
Religious beliefs	16 (6)	210 (64)	431 (64)	0.00
Praying and worshiping	6 (2)	193 (58)	410 (61)	0.40
Formal forms	4 (2)	30 (9)	46 (7)	1.68
Prescriptions	6 (2)	8 (2)	31 (5)	2.77
Cultural practices	14 (5)	37 (11)	97 (14)	1.87
Cultural values	7 (3)	33 (10)	87 (13)	1.72
Cultural practices	7 (3)	4 (1)	12 (2)	0.45
Human rights	8 (3)	7 (2)	6 (1)	2.66
Protection	6 (2)	5 (2)	6 (1)	0.81
Equality	2 (1)	2 (1)	0 (0)	4.11
Periphery	**5 (2)**	**5 (2)**	**18 (3)**	**1.30**
Political	3 (1)	5 (2)	16 (2)	0.78
Economic	2 (1)	0 (0)	2 (0)	0.50
Nothing	-	3 (1)	6 (1)	0.00

***† n* (%) respondents that listed one or more answers allocated to the (sub-)domains (coded 0-1), not the listed answers that are allocated to the (sub-)domains (coded 1-5); * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$.**

5.3.2.1 Human capital

Turning next to the data for particular domains, more than a third of the listed unique resources fell under the 'human capacities' domain, the two most prominent sub-domains in which were according to their prevalence 'mental health' and 'knowledge and skills'. The 'mental health' sub-domain, which was significantly less reported by formerly recruited youth, included diverse stress reduction strategies such as seeking relaxation, avoiding/ fleeing confrontation and regulating attention to triggers. The 'knowledge and skills' sub-domain referred to the innate and acquired capacities that are used in solving problems, productive activities, and successful performance. In addition, the participants referred to their 'personal values' and living according these values, including being responsible, humble, and trustful. The 'livelihood' sub-domain consisted of all means to generate income and acquire assets, meet the basic needs, and protect and further develop these properties. Differences between formerly recruited youth and non-recruited youth arose only in regard to 'having assets'. Moreover, being healthy and maintaining the own 'physical health' through adopting a healthy lifestyle was also considered to be helpful for a minority of the participants.

5.3.2.2 Social ecology

Looking across the domains of the framework, the largest percentage (45%) of the listed unique resources related to strengths inherent in the 'social ecology' of individuals. Herein, the sub-domain with the highest prevalence was 'social support', including non-material (emotional and informational, e.g., advise) and material (e.g., basic requirements) support that is received from, demanded for or being given to agents in the social ecology. As the sub-domain 'social support/social service & infrastructure' reveals, certain types of support were provided both by informal and formal support systems. The most prominent example was guidance and counseling provided both by the social network and social services, which was significantly more reported by formerly recruited participants. The 'social connectedness' sub-domain showed that having relationships with significant others making up the social network, like partners, family members and relatives, peers, neighbors, teachers, and religious, cultural or political leaders and institutions, constituted a considerable source of strength because of the involved company and opportunities for sharing with other people, among other things. 'Social service and infrastructure' includes NGO, UN and government supports in areas such as education, health care, protection, sensitization and leisure activities, and housed the second largest percentage of allocated resources. Other, rather smaller sub-domains of social ecology were 'law and order,' which included laws and security guidelines set to promote order, and 'safety', referring to a peaceful and unthreatening living environment and protection measures against external threats.

5.3.2.3 Culture & values

The third core domain 'culture and values' pertained to the grounded beliefs, values, and practices that are central parts of a culture. Prominent were sub-domains such as 'religious beliefs' and 'cultural practices'. Particularly prevalent resources for the participants emanated from religion, including individual as well as communal praying and worship, and religious prescriptions on how to live a good life. Culture and the culturally rooted practices and values such as storytelling, ancestor veneration, traditional music and dance formed the next major source of support. 'Human rights' were also a cultural sub-domain since cultural values and practices related to issues such as equality and protection, which are typically regarded as human rights issues.

5.3.2.4 Periphery

In the periphery of the three core domains were macro-level economic and political conditions that may also constitute a source of support. For example, the availability of employment opportunities was a general economic factor and military operations against the LRA a general political factor that were seen as a resource even though it did not fit into the three core domains.

5.3.3 Resource exchange

The thematic analysis of resource exchange processes between these three core domains illuminated exchange in all possible directions and hence alleged transactional use of resources. Such exchange was initiated by both individuals and agents in their social ecology.

Firstly, the exchange of resources was initiated by individuals, whereby 'human capacities' were utilized to access, strengthen and employ resources in the 'social ecology' and in wider 'culture and values'. Access to resources was obtained through deploying 'human capacities' such as 'knowledge and skills', 'personal values' and 'livelihood' assets in order to expand, restore and sustain 'social connections' or access to 'social support' and 'social services and infrastructure'. This 'social ecology' in turn was often used as a mediator to gain access to or become involved in certain 'cultural practices' or 'religious beliefs' like storytelling or praying, or to become entitled to 'human rights'. Next, strengthening of social and cultural resources occurred for instance by sharing material items or by giving advice to other people to promote 'social support', by reinforcing prevailing regulations to promote 'law and order' in the living environment, and by engaging in activism to stop cultural malpractices and ratify 'human rights'. Individuals reported to use these social and cultural resources to strengthen their own capacities. For example, they gained company and acceptance as well as guidance and counseling from 'social support' figures and 'social services' to strengthen their 'mental health' and problem-solving 'skills'. They utilized 'social services and infrastructure' like education and health care to strengthen respectively their 'knowledge' and 'physical health'. They also appealed to protection mechanisms for help in dealing with disturbing or harming situations. Further, they practiced 'cultural' ceremonies and norms or behaved according to 'religious' values and prescriptions. A concrete example of a reported resource envisioning this dynamism is '*going to people who tell stories or to places where stories are being told*', which showed the interrelatedness between 'knowledge and skills' (knowledge

whom/where to go to and the skill to involve oneself), 'social connectedness' (having a social network) and 'cultural practices' (storytelling).

Besides, the exchange of resources was also introduced by agents in the social ecology, whereby social resources were mobilized in a variety of ways to strengthen the 'human capital' and bolster or use the broader 'culture and values'. With regard to the 'human capital', social support figures, networks and services protectively interfered in situations where individual's 'mental health' and 'physical health' were threatened by an opponent or disturbing situation. They shaped opportunities by creating jobs for individuals to develop their 'knowledge and skills' and consolidate their 'livelihoods'. Agents in the 'social ecology' also improved individuals' access to 'social services and infrastructure', through advocating for better government policies and services conducive to human welfare. Regarding 'culture and values', social ecologies tended to use 'cultural practices' and norms to organize social life, as guidelines for interacting with one another, for dealing with disputes, and addressing familial or social malpractices, thereby consolidating the cultural fabric. This assisted individuals to gain 'knowledge and skills' about social-cultural norms and prescriptions, which supported them to live accordingly and enhanced chances of 'social connectedness' and acceptance in the broader community. 'Human rights' were used to end social malpractices and thus to improve the 'mental health' and 'physical health' of individuals. 'Religious beliefs' and prescriptions were often called on to end witchcraft practices that were considered as harmful for individuals. 'Social connections' also introduced individuals to spirituality and encouraged religiosity, as expressed in the reported example '*being encouraged by others to trust in and practice praying to God*', which demonstrates the dynamism between 'social support' (encouragement), 'mental health' (trust), and 'religious practices' (praying to God).

5.4 Discussion

This study, which identified a multitude of resources on multiple social ecological domains, contributes to the relatively young and evolving discipline of strengths-based research and interventions for war-affected young people. Since it revealed what formerly recruited youths consider helpful in dealing with encountered challenges, it has the potential to unveil antecedents of resilient post-child soldiering trajectories that could help to guide reintegration programming (Benard, 1991; Betancourt, 2011; Luthar et al., 2000; Rutter, 2006).

The research findings indicated that the former child soldiers in this study are not numbed, helpless victims of war-violence, but actively engage with and negotiate the resources in themselves and their environment to deal with the challenges they experience. This suggests that prevailing stereotypes of former child soldiers as an irreparably damaged and lost generation are inaccurate and misjudge their strength (Akello, Richters, & Reis, 2006; Annan et al., 2009; Wessells, 2006b).

Besides, social ecologies appeared to form a rich reservoir of resources in addition to those endowed to individuals (Hobfoll, Freedy, Lane, & Geller, 1990). Individual capacities were reported to help in accessing the social ecological resources, which in their turn might bolster the human resources. The findings also indicated that social systems fulfilled a 'gatekeeper role' (Hobfoll & Lilly, 1993), whereby they facilitated but possibly also may restrain people's access to social and cultural capital, and restrict them to use their resources for valued ends (Hobfoll & Lilly, 1993; Pick & Sirkin, 2010). While hypothesized, this did not seem to pertain specifically to former child soldiers, as few differences appeared between the reports of formerly recruited and non-recruited participants.

This might testify of former child soldiers' agentic capacity to recognize and use resources within themselves and their environment, given that people do not only need objectively available resources but also the emotional and cognitive perception that these resources are accessible (Pick & Sirkin, 2010). The latter perception might help to explain why, despite the significant prevalence of stigmatization (Annan, Blattman, & Horton, 2006; Blattman & Annan, 2011), former child soldiers maintained their overall feeling of being supported by their war-affected communities, even to a level that equaled that of non-recruited youth.

The 'gatekeeper' role of social systems indicates that they promote an environment that allows people to employ and exchange communal resources in service of formerly recruited young people's well-being. This is conceptualized as 'community resilience', that is the community-level resources and processes of adaptation during or following a threat or actual adversity (Wessells, 2012). Hence, it requires an entire community to adapt and react resiliently to the consequences of warfare, including the presence of former child soldiers who possibly bear accountability towards the affected population.

In order to be resilient, individuals and communities also interact with wider social ecological levels at which resources can be found that emanate from broader cultural, religious and human rights frameworks. These sources of support brought forth by the broader socio-cultural surrounding indicate post-conflict resilience beyond the individual level, demonstrating the importance of conceptualizing it not as an individual quality or process

but as relationally, socially and culturally scaffolded (Tol, Jordans, Reis, & De Jong, 2009; Wessells, 2012). The socio-ecological reservoir of resources and the transactions that occur between the different ecological levels is therefore termed 'ecological resilience' (Tol et al., 2009).

Among the most important resources reported by former child soldiers was religion. Religiosity, referring to both personal and institutional beliefs and practices, forms a lens through which experiences are shaped and interpreted, and incorporates values and prescriptions that may be drawn on as a cognitive coping strategy as well as practices that stimulate a collective discourse for meaning making and mutual assistance (Laufer & Solomon, 2011; Park, 2005; Shanahan & Veale, 2010; Stark, 2006). Broader, the cultural framework clearly engendered a range of culturally rooted communal values and practices that may mediate the resilience of former child soldiers (Shanahan & Veale, 2010).

Besides, social relationships and services were reported to proffer assorted emotional, informative and instrumental resources for former child soldiers. This demonstrated the transactional and dynamic character of social support. Obvious attempts were made by the participants to engage their social support systems and to invest in these systems so as to nurture the connections and secure continued accessibility of social capital (Norris & Kaniasty, 1996; Hobfoll, 2010). Social support systems in turn tended to mobilize their resources to provide assistance to young people and to facilitate their access to cultural and religious resources. As such, social support promoted access to other valued resources (Hobfoll, 1998).

Formerly recruited participants also reported to draw on a wide repertoire of coping strategies (in the PWG-framework captured as mental health capacities), being the cognitive and behavioural efforts that one undertakes to deal with experiences appraised as stressful because these are defying or exceeding the resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The most frequently reported coping strategies aimed at influencing the appraisal of stress and reducing psychological discomfort rather than addressing the cause of experienced stress or changing the stressful situation. This finding convenes with other observations of high use of avoidant coping and its evaluation as helpful by former child soldiers and war-affected young people in general (Boothby, Crawford et al., 2006; Vindevogel, Broekaert, & Derluyn, in press; Wessells, 2006b).

Moreover, a multiplicity of rather tangible resources such as knowledge and skills, education, livelihood and monetary or material assistance was reported. Education is generally considered a key resource for it enhances access to a range of other resources such as hopefulness, the development of competencies and coping strategies, and perspectives on employment

(Arafat & Musleh, 2006; Ager, 2006; Annan et al., 2009; Arafat & Musleh, 2006; Wessells, 2006b). The same applies to economic welfare, which in its turn facilitates self-confidence, improved standard of living, a healthy lifestyle, and obtainment of own land among other things (Wessells, 2006a). These resources enable one to develop a meaningful social role in civil society and provide the tools for working upon a better future, highly valued ends for former child soldiers (Peters, 2004; Wessells, 2006a, 2006b).

These findings enhanced the understanding of fundamental human, social and cultural resources, which is essential for informing prevention, intervention and policy bodies about what works for young people under challenging circumstances in the wake of armed conflict and how efforts can efficiently be invested in the promotion of their resilience (Betancourt, 2011). There is sound evidence that following adversity, such as armed conflict, investing in resources is a priority, even if resources seem to be in stock and communities are found to be resilient (Hobfoll & Lilly, 1993; Kelly, 1966; Norris & Kaniasty, 1996; Wessells, 2012). The availability of resources thus is not antithetical to the need for interventions, yet cautiousness is required to not prematurely offer or externally impose programs that neglect and even impede indigenous sources and mechanisms of psychosocial support (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010; Boothby, Strang et al., 2006). The participants in this study reported only few external, specialized professional interventions among the resources. Although this could mean that such interventions were not available and therefore not evaluated as helpful, most social services and infrastructure included basic facilities such as schools and hospitals instead of external specialized interventions. The richness and diversity of the identified indigenous resources suggest that professional interventions should start at the grassroots by building on naturally and spontaneously occurring sources and processes of support. For communities to be resourceful and resilient on a sustainable basis, there is need to bolster the socio-cultural capital and allow nurturing exchange with other resourceful systems, e.g., formal support systems. In addition, efforts should address prevailing risk factors that may outweigh these existing resources and remove possible barriers that prevent people from accessing and using their resources to achieve desired ends (Hobfoll & Lilly, 1993; Pick & Sirkin, 2010; Wessells, 2012).

Hence, professional interventions should focus on strengthening available capital and promoting social equality (Peeters, 2010). Given formerly recruited participants' significant reports of guidance and counseling resources, it should be noted that in general, youth who had been severely affected by warfare might face some specific challenges and therefore value

particular resources that warrant additional specialized or individualized support (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2007). However, such specialized supports might be provided more effectively through partnerships with communities and community-based supports than through individual counseling. Through targeting availability, access to and use of resources by linking individual and communal processes, interventions are not only more likely to succeed and be more efficient and sustainable (Hobfoll & Lilly, 1993; Sarason & Lorentz, 1979; Kelly, 1966; Trickett, 1984; Wessells, 2012), they also contribute to a sense of ownership and have empowering effects on people in the sense that they are enabled to better control the challenges they encounter in their lives and even positively affect their environments (Kostelny, 2006; Rappaport, 1977; Pick & Sirkin, 2010). This has been consistently associated with resilience and the prevention of stress sequealae, as the degree of fit between resources and sources of distress determines to a considerable extent the response to challenges on the continuum between resilience or vulnerability (Hobfoll, 2010; Rappaport, 1977; Rutter, 2006; Wessells, 2012).

This elicitive method brought forward the voices of those it concerns and illuminated their subjective understanding of their situation. A possible constraint of this method was that the prevalence of resources listed by the participants may represent their actual helpfulness but may also be biased by the availability and accessibility of these resources for the participants. As a result, a particular resource might not have been mentioned either because it was not evaluated as helpful or because it was not available and therefore its helpfulness could not be appraised by the participants. Further research is recommended to clarify this distinction.

Although these findings represent the specific reality of northern Uganda and generalization of findings across settings might be constrained by contextual variation, accumulation of evidence can engender cross-cutting key principles in understanding and supporting resilience of former child soldiers (Stark, Boothby, & Ager, 2008). The evidence generated through this study corroborates the conceptual framework as developed by a consortium of academic partners and humanitarian agencies with extensive experience in the field of psychosocial well-being of war-affected populations worldwide (Psychosocial Working Group, 2002). It also affirms the importance of many of the fragmentally identified resources in previous studies on the resilience of former child soldiers (Annan et al., 2009; Betancourt & Khan, 2008; Corbin, 2008; Cortes & Buchanan, 2007; Veale & Stavrou, 2007).

This study mainly focused on resources for former child soldiers, but was part of a larger research that also looked into the presence of challenges

they encounter (Vindevogel, De Schryver, Broekaert, & Derluyn, in press). However, given that the reality is analytically complex and resilience rather a matter of dynamic interplay between these challenges and resources (Rutter, 2006), this study is only a first though crucial step towards unpacking the complexity of human responses to adversity (Rutter, 2006). Future research could make a great advancement by shading light on the interplay between sources of resilience and sources of distress.

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6

"It helps me transform in my life from the past to the new". The meaning of resources for former child soldiers*

* Based on Vindevogel, S., Broekaert, E., & Derluyn, I. (in press). "It helps me transform in my life from the past to the new". The meaning of resources for former child soldiers. Journal of Interpersonal Violence.

"This is how I want to be in the future. I want to become a man who is well-dressed and respected in the community. Nowadays there is nothing good that I am doing, there is no money. I don't have money to buy clothes to stay among people. This makes me fear that someone may say something that makes me get annoyed. For this reason, I don't like staying where there are many people, apart from going to church on Sundays or to watch football. The prayers give me strength and hope. I go and watch football to pass time and keep busy. But I want to get something to do, to make my life easier."

Jasper | 22 years

Abstract

Although former child soldiers face considerable challenges after their return from the warring faction to the war-affected society, the presence of resources enables many to maintain well-being in the wake of child soldiering. Academic research has recently engaged with identifying these significant resources, but has left the question why they are helpful to former child soldiers largely unaddressed.

This study therefore focuses on the meaning underlying certain phenomena that causes them to become resources. Semi-structured in-depth interviews and a free-listing task on resources were conducted with 48 northern Ugandan former child soldiers. The phenomenological hermeneutical method is applied to analyze their lived experiences and the meaning they assign to resources.

Four essential themes emerge from this study, representing the fourfold meaning of resources for former child soldiers, in helping them 1) to break with their former existence as child soldiers, 2) to be able to overcome the challenges in their current life, 3) to belong to others and the environment to which they return, and 4) to become the person they aspire to be.

Considering these research themes in the context of former child soldiers' return process, parallels with theories on transition are recognized and further explored so as to contextualize this emerging meaning. As such, this research delivers empirical evidence illustrating how resources help to pilot former child soldiers through transition in the wake of child soldiering.

6.1 Introduction

Countless people are confronted with adversity in their lives, and in the wake of adversity with its possible consequences for their psychosocial well-being (Bonanno, 2004). Among them is a large group of child soldiers, for whom the increased and intensified exposure to warfare forms a severe threat to their psychological health and social position (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2008; Wessells, 2006; Williams, 2007). When returning from the warring faction to the war-affected society, they not only carry the burden of their child soldiering experiences but are also confronted with a range of adversities emerging from the (post-)conflict context (Wessells, 2006; Williamson & Robinson, 2006). As such, the consequences of child soldiering linger well beyond the direct exposure to it, creating a multitude of ongoing challenges for former child soldiers attempting to reshape their lives after returning. Nonetheless, research consistently shows that the majority of people exposed to adversity seem able to maintain their well-being in the face of substantial challenges brought about by the adverse events, and hence experience rather trivial or transitional impact from them (Bonanno, 2004; Camfield & McGregor, 2005). This is generally referred to as 'resilience', capturing the occurrence of positively valued trajectories within the context of significant adversity (Kaplan, 2005; Luthar, 2006; Masten & Obradovic, 2008; Rutter, 2006). This also pertains to former child soldiers, of whom many are doing well and even thrive after child soldiering, despite considerable challenges in its aftermath (Betancourt, Borisova, Williams, Brennan, Whitfield, de la Soudiere et al., 2010; Klasen, Oettingen, Daniels, Post, Hoyer, & Adam, 2010; Wessells, 2006).

These findings gradually engendered investigations of what supports people in maintaining well-being amidst adversity-related challenges (Hobfoll, 2002), generating the insight that a range of intra- and interpersonal factors and processes can act as resources that strengthen the individual's capacity to respond resiliently (Hobfoll, 2002; Pat-Horenczyk, Rabinowitz, Rice, & Tucker-Levin, 2009; Wessells, 2009). From this perspective, resources are defined as "those entities that either are centrally valued in their own right (e.g., self-esteem, close attachments, health, and inner peace), or act as a means to obtain centrally valued ends (e.g., money, social support, and credit)" (Hobfoll, 2002, p. 307). This field of research generated a proliferation of resource-based theories (see Hobfoll, 2002 for an overview), which, when pertaining to former child soldiers, have focused predominantly on identifying the resources that are subjectively significant

after returning from the armed group (Annan, Brier, & Aryemo, 2009; Corbin, 2008; Cortes & Buchanan, 2007; Veale & Stavrou, 2007), or on objectively exemplifying the resources' role in affording protection from psychosocial distress (see Betancourt & Khan, 2008 for an overview). These studies show that certain resources, for instance spirituality or family connectedness, play a role in averting the significant psychosocial problems that could be expected to follow to child soldiering, such as stress reactions or social exclusion.

While systematically identifying resources is of utmost value, it is considered at least as important to study *why* certain resources are perceived as helpful (Layne, Warren, Shalev, & Watson, 2007; Luthar, 2006; Pat-Horenczyk et al., 2009). Hitherto, far fewer studies of resources for former child soldiers have explored the meanings assigned to certain factors and processes that lead them to become resources – leaving the question why resources help largely disregarded. Moving beyond delineating single variables, through exploring and utilizing the resources' meaning, can bring several benefits (Boothby, 2008; Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2008; Layne et al., 2007; Luthar, 2006; Williams, Alexander, Bolsover, & Bakke, 2008). Understanding the meaning of resources for former child soldiers is valuable for it may unveil an insider's perspective on what essentially helps (Camfield, Crivello, & Woodhead, 2009). It may also produce rich descriptions of the resources in the light of returning from the armed group, and thus contextualize the meaning as constructed in this particular context (Annan et al., 2009; Baltes, 1997; Camfield et al., 2009; Jareg, 2005; Trickett, 1995). Hence, it contributes to a 'thick description' of resources, i.e. an insider's perspective on the ways in which meaning is assigned by people to experienced phenomena (Donmoyer, 2001; Geertz, 1973) and thus to a more comprehensive understanding of the meaning in phenomena perceived as resources (or missing in phenomena not perceived as resources). These theoretical insights may guide interventions to build upon an understanding of what is key to resilient trajectories, to bolster this through programming resources that reinforce what is valued and hence that contribute to the valued ends. As such, this research offers guidelines to further develop resources based on evidence about what helps in the wake of child soldiering, eventually improving the efficacy of support for former child soldiers. This study thus aims to explore the meaning of resources for former child soldiers who return from a warring faction into the war-affected society.

6.2 Method

The meaning of resources is not openly observable but rather is latent in those who experience it. This is referred to as 'lived experience', i.e. everyday experience lived consciously and assigned meaning in retrospective reflection, rendering it a determinate meaningful aspect of life (Van Manen, 1990). Studying lived experiences implies studying someone's being-in-the-world, i.e. someone's existence embedded in a particular context and what the studied subject means for someone (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004; Van Manen, 1990). Appropriate for grasping this is a qualitative, inductive data-led, discovery-oriented approach (Camfield et al., 2009), and in particular 'the phenomenological hermeneutical method for researching lived experience' (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004). This method, basically inspired by Ricoeur's phenomenological hermeneutical interpretation theory (Ricoeur, 1976), is phenomenological in the sense that it aims at understanding the meaning of lived experiences, and is hermeneutical in its intention to interpret the narratives that are expressed and recorded. As such, a phenomenological hermeneutical method enables the meaning of lived experience to be studied through the interpretation of narrated text (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004).

6.2.1 Participants

The study was conducted in northern Uganda, an area seriously affected by a long-lasting and complex armed conflict in which the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) forcibly recruited thousands of minors as child soldiers (Blattman & Annan, 2008). As this study is part of a larger research project, its sample of former child soldiers was extracted from a larger sample of 1,008 war-affected adolescents in Lira district. This larger sample originated from random selection of respectively six secondary schools and for each school two surrounding villages in the strata urban, peri-urban and rural. In the schools, students of classes Senior 2 and Senior 3 were included, while in the villages, inhabitants aged 12 to 25 years were invited to participate. These participants completed a questionnaire inquiring among other things whether they had been abducted by the LRA and whether they were willing to be further interviewed. To extract the smaller sample for this study, stratified random sampling was applied to the group of participants who answered both questions affirmatively to select in each class and each village one male and one female former child soldier. None refused to participate, constituting a sample of 48 participants.

The sample consists of 23 female and 25 male participants, with an average age of 17 years. The majority of the participants originate from Lira district, while the others reside here for familial, educational or economic reasons. About half of the participants attend school, while the others either work – mostly in farming– or do not have any occupation. All were abducted by the LRA, with a median duration of one and a half years, ranging from a few days to eighteen years. At the time of interviewing the median duration of return from the LRA was approximately five years, ranging from one to nine years. Pseudonyms are used throughout the study to preserve the anonymity of the participants.

6.2.2 Procedure

Individual face-to-face interviews were conducted, during which open-ended questions were propounded in narrative format with minimal researcher intervention in order to elicit personal experiences relevant to the research topic. Through freely recounting the lived experience in a thorough and authentic way, the meaning of the experience is constructed and unveiled by the participants (Van Manen, 1990) and interpreted and understood by the researcher (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004). The interview, lasting approximately two to three hours, inquired into the participants' process of return from the armed group to society, starting at the moment of return up until the interview. To facilitate this reconstruction exercise for the participants, the interview was based on the Life-line Interview Method (LIM), which is often used to obtain autobiographical information about life events (Assink & Schroots, 2010; Arzy, Adi-Japha & Blanke, 2009). Accordingly, the participant was asked to situate significant life events chronologically on a timeline representing this period and to tell their own life-story on basis of this visualized reconstruction. As such, the participant was stimulated to broach meaningful experiences, albeit the focus was the meaning (essence) rather than the experiences (facts). To explore this meaning in depth, the researcher sporadically intervened by proposing clarifying questions or encouraging reflection on the experiences, orienting the interview towards accounts of resources' meaning.

The interviews were complemented by a secondary data source, which was used mainly to cross-check the interview data and hence contribute to the findings' comprehensiveness and credibility (Stiles, 1993). Prior to the interviews, the participants individually completed a free-listing task on resources as part of their participation in the larger research project. Those participants with sufficient literacy skills administered this task themselves, while the other participants were supported in this by the researcher. The

participants were asked to list what they had been experiencing as helpful, for which they indicated resources identified within themselves and their environment and explained why these were experienced as having helped them. This delivered free-listing task transcripts from all participants in addition to the interviews. The use of multiple data sources enhanced the richness of the data and assisted the corroboration of findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The study design was approved by the Ethical Committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of Ghent University, as well as by the Resident District Commissioner of Lira, the principals and LC1 chairmen. All data were collected by the first author over a three-month period of fieldwork from October until December 2010. The written informed assent or consent of the participants was obtained after informing them of the conditions, purpose and course of the study as well as of the possibilities of further psychosocial assistance and feedback of the research findings. The free-listing task and interviews were conducted in a confidential place in the participants' school or village, natural habitats that allowed to account for relevant features of the social context. The participants were offered the choice of proceeding with the data collection in English or Lango; 39 participants opted for their mother tongue. A young female Ugandan translator was therefore always present to assist when desirable. All interviews were recorded and afterwards transcribed verbatim by two bilingual Ugandans. The translation and transcription's accuracy was controlled by duplication of some interview records, taking into account the interpretational character of transcription. However, this translation process may have constrained the richness of the language, limiting the opportunities to analyze it in depth (Marecek, 2003). This was taken into account, when selecting the research method, by excluding those methods preoccupied with the analysis of language characteristics such as wording and phrasing.

6.2.3 Analysis

The analysis occurred in a manner analogous to the hermeneutical circle, implying a circular reference between understanding the integral text and explaining its partial fragments (Gadamer, 1975; Heidegger, 1962). This was implemented through the three methodological phases of the phenomenological hermeneutical method (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004). For clarification and transparency purposes, an example of this process is depicted in table 1.

Table 1: Example of the phenomenological hermeneutical analysis

Meaning unit	Condensation	Subtheme	Theme
"God could be the most key aspect of life, for if you don't know God… you'll not have wisdom. If you're not religious enough, there is no life for you in the future. So knowing God is also wisdom, that is what I know."	To gain wisdom	Becoming qualified	Becoming
"Staying with friends makes you forget of the past"	To forget the past	Breaking with memories of the past	Breaking
"What made me also happy, through peer groups I was able to change from… from lifestyles in the bush to staying home together with my parents."	To change lifestyle	Breaking with the former life style	Breaking

The first phase consisted of 'naive reading', whereby the text was thoroughly read in order to become familiar with the broad content and grasp the preliminary meaning as a whole. Each interview was separately read several times, after which it was repeatedly read in relation to the other interviews, until a first naive understanding was conceived. Thereby, specific attention was drawn to the text conveying information on the research theme, i.e. the meaning behind perceived resources. Other text parts were taken into consideration but were not included in the analysis. Specific attention was given to potential similarities and differences between the participants in terms of how socio-demographic characteristics might influence the meaning-making of resources.

Building upon the naive reading, the second phase encompassed a 'structural analysis'. In this study, thematic structural analysis was performed to search for clusters of fragments with similar meaning, discover patterned regularities in the text and deduce concepts that capture the central notions of the lived experience. This implies that the text was read line by line to identify units containing one essential meaning related to the research theme. Subsequently, the identified meaning units were reflected on in relation to the naive understanding, to corroborate the first analytic phase. If so, the meaning units were condensed through allocating a concise description disclosing the meaning. These condensations were compared to further condense similar ones into sub-themes, after which this process was repeated on the sub-themes so as to abstract overall themes.

In the third phase, the themes were recontextualized to obtain a 'comprehensive understanding'. This entails that the themes emerging from the structural analysis were considered in the light of the research question, research context, and relevant literature. Concretely, the whole text was reread with the naive understanding and the themes in mind to critically revise the analytic process; and associations with literature were sought to

facilitate awareness and expansion of the pre-understanding and hence widen and deepen the understanding.

The first two phases were completed by the first author under supervision of the second and third authors. This was executed by use of the software program for qualitative data analysis Nvivo, mainly because of its 'in vivo coding' feature that allows the user to remain close to the participants' accounts when creating the themes inductively. During the third phase, joint consideration of the emerging sub-themes resulted in the construction of comprehensive themes and the initial development of an overarching theoretical framework. Throughout the entire research process, awareness of the researchers' social identities as an inevitable influence on both the study course and its outcome was intentionally preserved through reflexive analysis within the bicultural research team and with some participants. A peer debriefing on the analysis was given to the research team in order to check the fittingness of the data analysis, enhancing the research's trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checks were intentionally not conducted as a verification strategy, in accordance with the phenomenological critique that every member has a unique experience and hence subjective account rather than expertise on 'the' reality (Holloway, 2005), but were organized one year after the data collection in order to check for potential missing information. No information had to be added nor removed. Disclosure of the researchers' paradigm and orientation through this manuscript is respected in order to facilitate interpretations in perspective. The following results need to be understood in the light of these research characteristics and limitations.

6.3 Results

6.3.1 Phase 1: naive understanding

The explication of the resources' meaning by the participants was characterized by the alternation of determined explanations of what they had thought through beforehand and a process of reflection responsive to the probing questions of the interviewer. This process generated assorted meanings relating to how resources magnify positive aspects and evolutions, and help with occupying a niche created by experienced challenges. The meanings also referred both to the self, expressing how resources help the participants, and to the other, articulating how resources help other people or services to support the participants. No significant

differences in demographic characteristics were found in how resources contribute to the lives of former child soldiers.

6.3.2 Phase 2: Structural analysis

The structural analysis resulted in four overall themes (table 2).

Table 2: Themes discerned from structural analysis

	Themes
1.	Breaking with the former state as child soldier
2.	Being able to overcome the challenges in current life
3.	Belonging to others and the environment
4.	Becoming the one aspired to be

6.3.2.1 Breaking

> *"When I had just returned, I felt sad about this mistreatment in the bush but I received constant advice from my parents not to worry myself but let go. It helps me to forget about the bush totally."*

This observation by eighteen-year-old Francis, explaining how good parental advice forms a resource for forgetting about the past, is illustrative of the first theme of 'breaking' with the former state of being a child soldier. This theme appears in 69 of the 96 transcripts, and herein in 248 of the 1,476 fragments.

The participants say that the resources help them to live a different life compared to that of a child soldier. This 'new' life is characterized by being reunited with beloved ones, having a place to live and feeling at home, and by stability and safety because of a peaceful living environment and protection against rebels. This realizes a clear demarcation from the former life as a child soldier. An illustration of this is found in the interview with seventeen-year-old Lucy, who relates how the Amnesty Act forms a resource, for it facilitates detachment from child soldiering and entry into favorable living conditions divergent from those of child soldiering:

> *"To help children still in captivity, Amnesty Act should continue. This will promote peace and stabilize the country. It benefits children by returning to live with their parents and get that parental love. They get the chance of staying again in the community they left long time ago and to begin new life in the same community. Because if you stay in the bush, you stay like an animal, it is not really easy to stay in the bush. So they can begin a new life."*

Resources also help the participants to break with their child soldiering past in terms of thoughts, feelings and behavior. Resources enable them not to be reminded of their child soldiering experiences and thus not to think about them, gradually allowing them to remove the memories. Resources also help to suppress or extinguish bad feelings and mental health problems related to the child soldiering experience, such as nightmares, suicidal thinking and hallucinations. Furthermore, resources support the participants in changing their lifestyle and desisting from behaviors associated with child soldiering. Moses, a twenty-two-year-old young man mentally troubled by his experiences of child soldiering, elucidates how his cognitive-behavioral stress management reaction in fleeing to the bush or inside the house is a coping resource that helps him to deal with unwanted memories and feelings provoked by external triggers such as shouting or abuse by other people:

> *"The bad things people do to me make me go crazy. I then see the killing, I also see myself in the bush with dead people and snakes around me. These feelings come when there is a lot of shouting, or when someone abuses me. When I'm at home, I go inside and close the door, or I run to the bush and sleep...until it disappears. It helps me for that time."*

The meaning of resources is, moreover, framed in relation to others. Resources help some participants to conceal their past as child soldiers from others so as to avoid being approached or treated as a former child soldier. Others, however, feel supported by resources in revealing their past, for people to know the truth instead of rumors or stereotypes about child soldiers, which often leads to ameliorated views and treatment. In addition, resources help in pursuing conciliation with people with whom relationships had been affected in the past, since these facilitate forgiveness, reduce fear of each other, and change people's attitudes towards former child soldiers. Emmanuel, 20 years of age, explains how his mother's and his own initiative in approaching other people are a helpful resource to end fear of him:

> *"My mother connected me with some people, and sometimes I would also go to others to start up a conversation. I would go to them and ask why they fear me, and inform them that I am not a lion who will eat them, and tell them we are all God's children. It helped me because some would stop fearing me."*

6.3.2.2 Being

> *"There is now peace in the area, because now you won't hear any gun shots, you can get food and there is freedom to go anywhere. It made my life easier."*

In a second theme, 'being' able to overcome the challenges in current life stands out. This appears in 84 of the 96 transcripts, and is composed out of 448 of the 1,476 fragments. In the aforementioned fragment, twenty-three-year-old Winnie clarifies that she considers the prevailing peace to be a resource that helped with challenging living conditions such as shootings, food shortage and movement restriction, making her life considerably easier.

Generally, participants explain that resources keep them alive, enabling them to still 'be' in the world despite the confrontation with existential challenges. This is experienced in relation to both physical and psychological survival. Pertaining to physical survival, resources help to fulfill basic human needs such as food, clothing and shelter, and allow them to become or remain healthy. Pertaining to psychological survival, resources help them to bear a nearly unbearable situation, through enhancing tolerance and acceptance of challenges and through preventing the participants from succumbing to them. The seventeen-year-old Angela explains in her interview how she felt supported to hold on by the welcoming atmosphere that constituted a resource upon her return from the armed group:

> *"If they had not welcomed me, it would have affected my happiness because I was still disappointed that much of my life was wasted in the bush and therefore I would feel like going back or kill myself, if I didn't find anybody at home."*

Furthermore, resources have the capacity to empower the participants in their confrontation with challenging living conditions or life events. Participants report finding mental strength through the resources for them to infuse a sense of hope and courage and to motivate them to become strong-hearted and to struggle further. The resources also allow the challenges faced by the participants to be tackled. They are enabled to reason more rationally about situations and get useful ideas on how to deal with them. As an illustration, Daniel, twenty-two years old, explains how sensitization campaigns lead to more courage and hope and therefore constitute a resource in dealing with stigmatization after the return from the armed group:

> *"The major problem encountered by me when I was back from the bush, was stigmatization. They used to sensitize these things from the radio. And that is how I also had courage out of it, that okay, the government has that heart. If the media is trying to communicate the issues of stigmatization, then it means there is a kind of support to we, people who are returnees, people who are coming back home. Yes. It means they love us. Since the media is trying to sensitize it, we can catch up with life still."*

Furthermore, resources help to facilitate the participants' situation and their being in that situation. As such, resources help to eliminate challenges and subsequent suffering in life, or to avoid potential challenges and hence a life they don't want to live. Some participants specifically refer to war and how resources help in ending war-related suffering. Resources also help to avoid, reduce or abolish undesired thoughts and emotions when confronted with such challenges. In addition, resources help the participants to initiate strategies to ease their being in a challenging situation. These strategies include cognitive regulation, so as to distract the mind, ignore negative environmental triggers, and eradicate bad thoughts, as well as affect regulation, in an attempt to overcome bad feelings or control emotions when triggered by challenges. Sixteen-year-old Joshua describes during the interview how life skills acquired through scouting operate as a resource to facilitate self-regulation:

> *"I like scouting because I was given life skills to control my emotions if someone annoys me. It prevents me from reacting bad when someone annoys me because if I fight and hurt someone, they may take me to prison."*

6.3.2.3 Belonging

> *"When I came back from the bush, I had access to good ideas from the community. A good idea was to mix freely with people. When you stay with other people, it takes away the loneliness and it brings me at the same line with the community. If I did not have people close by me, my life would be hard. The life I resumed was a life of harmony."*

Seventeen-year-old Lucy's observation shows how the advice to join other people forms a resource facilitating social harmony. This is illustrative of the third theme, 'belonging' with others and to the environment. This emerges in 84 of the 96 transcripts, and is found in 488 of the 1,476 fragments.

To begin with, the participants express how resources facilitate adjusting to life at home and according social expectations. More specifically, resources

are perceived as helpful in getting used to the changed environment and the people they profoundly want to become part of, and in learning how to live amongst and with them so as to become 'good' members. Thereby, resources assist them to bridge prevailing differences with other people and to feel equal to them, so as to avoid or end segregation. This is particularly expressed in relation to their peers and friends who have not experienced child soldiering. Isaiah, 19 years old, testifies how information on social codes of conduct is a resource for it helps him in getting acquainted with the new situation:

> *"I was taught on how to stay in the community and to associate with people. Without it, it would have been difficult for me because how people were staying in the community was quite different from how we were staying in the bush. This helped me up to today."*

On the contrary, the participants experience how resources assist others to get acquainted with former child soldiers, hence facilitating the environment and people to adjust to them and at the same time helping the participants to dodge or purge destructive attitudes and mistreatment by others. Emmanuel, twenty years old, explains how sensitization of community members on how to deal with former child soldiers is a resource that helps him become part of the community:

> *"They were trained on how to handle us, for them not to isolate in case of a problem but to help those ones fallen in problems. It helped to be treated as part of the community, not as outsiders."*

Besides, the meaning of resources is delineated regarding their role in differentiating between good and bad. Participants share how resources help them to realize that what they had experienced as a child soldier is bad, and to learn what is considered as good in life and how this can be pursued. Through the resources, they feel enabled to identify and counteract destructive influences and intentions, permitting them to keep away from people or places perceived as causing badness. Moreover, resources help them to steer clear of bad peer pressure, avoid doing wrong to other people, behave according to social expectations and exhibit valued characteristics, allowing them to be a 'good' person and to convince others of their 'goodness'. Resources thus contribute to appreciation by others, and make the participants feel accepted, respected, loved, popular, rewarded and valued. As an illustration, the twelve-year-old Gloria explains how her quiet response to provocation acts as a resource, for it helps her to be appreciated and rewarded by other people who value such a response:

> *"When we are going to fetch water at the well, some other children abuse me that my mother is dead and that I am dirty. I just keep quiet. When I keep quiet, people will say I am good and they will help me."*

Furthermore, resources help in creating harmonized and sustainable relationships characterized by mutual support, through stimulating other people and services to deliver support themselves or advocate for it as well as by stimulating the participants to be supportive towards other people and the environment. Resources also support the participants in approaching other people and interacting freely with them, while at the same time stimulating other people to stay and relate with them. Resources thus facilitate togetherness and avoid loneliness and isolation. An account of this was given by Vincent, fourteen years old, who identifies organized games as a resource for bringing together people in the community:

> *"[An NGO] brought games to the villages. This brought children together and created an opportunity to mix and play with each other. In this way, people from [the NGO] helped to bring us together through the games."*

6.3.2.4 Becoming

> *"On my way back home, I thought I would not get both my parents and my sisters and brothers, so I was surprised getting all of them at home. This made me happy, because without the parents, I wouldn't be where I am today, not the person I am right now. There would be no one to pay my school fees, by now I would just be farming."*

Sixteen-year-old Joshua's observation demonstrates how parental presence and support are resources that allow him to study and be educated. This is illustrative of the fourth theme that appears at the forefront, revealed in 76 of the 96 transcripts and covering 292 of the 1,476 fragments, referring to 'becoming' the person they aspire to be.

The meaning of resources is firstly expressed with reference to the participants' living situation. Resources are appreciated because they facilitate progression in life and hence improve their living standard. The participants strive to make up arrears relative to others by recovering what was lost during the war and developing towards a wealthier existence in the future. This orientation towards the future opens up perspectives and brings hope in their lives. During the interviews, the participants gave several accounts of how resources help in improving their living situation, of which the following account of education as a resource for a better standard of living in the future, given by eighteen-year-old Nicholas, is illustrative:

> *"Studying helps me, because if I reach the higher level, I will find a job and earn some little money to improve my standard of living. I think it is important to study now to have a good future, because if you study your future is always bright and it gives you hope for tomorrow."*

The meaning assigned to resources also refers to their personal development. The participants share how resources support the process of self-actualization and realization of their full potential, by allowing them to acquire valued qualities and to be productive. Resources therefore help them to become independent as well as attain a respectable reputation and high esteem in society. The participants said that through this, resources make them feel successful. As such, resources help them with their aspiration to become someone and to achieve something in life. For instance, nineteen-year-old Denis gives an account of how finding a job in the state army is a resource contributing to the realization of what he plans for himself in his future:

> *"I have an interest in joining the UPDF. Being a soldier will enable me to work hard to develop my country and promote peace, as well as to work in order to achieve what I have planned for my life. I developed this interest to join the army early in primary school, because they used to call me 'Denis Soldier'. If my parents would refuse me to join the army, it would not allow me to achieve my set career."*

Through all this, resources are experienced as assisting the participants to pursue how they want themselves and their lives to be: cleared of troubles and worries, interlaced by relaxation and enjoyment. Resources allow the participants to experience pleasure and hence to relish life to the fullest. Some participants appreciate resources because of their support in expressing themselves by looking good in their personal appearance. They also point to the relevance of experiencing hedonic emotions such as feeling comfortable, free and satisfied. According to their experience, some resources have the capacity to support them in this, as sixteen-year-old Irene explains in talking about having many friends, which she considers to be a resource for experiencing joy:

> *"I made some friends who support me. With them, I can now come out and do some exercise, sing or read story books. This helps me, because story books make me laugh, singing brings joy."*

6.3.3 Phase 3: Comprehensive understanding

Considering these themes in the context of return from the warring faction to the war-affected society, parallels with key theoretical approaches of transition are recognized and further explored so as to contextualize the emerging meaning of resources. Of particular interest are developmental models, such as Piaget's cognitive development theory, that delineate how progressive cognitive abilities facilitate dealing with challenging change. Additionally, anthropological conceptualizations of transition that essentially build on these core developmental assumptions but add a contextual dimension to transition form a valuable supplementing framework (Vogler, Crivello, & Woodhead, 2008). These interdisciplinary perspectives and theoretical assumptions on transition are complementary and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the resources' meaning (Vogler et al., 2008), which will be delineated in the next section.

6.4 Discussion

Transition is generally defined as a change process occurring at specific periods or turning points during the life course (Vogler et al., 2008). A few theoretical papers have used this lens to study young people's return from armed groups and documented the involved disconnection from the military life stage and its particular framework for meaning-making of the world and personal development (De Boeck & Honwana, 2005; Jareg, 2005). This causes a lack of recognizable role and position indicators, which may deteriorate their sense of identity and belonging (De Boeck & Honwana, 2005; Grimes, 2002; Turner, 1967; van Gennep, 1960; Van Wolputte, 2004; Wessells, 2006). However, what remains largely unknown is how former child soldiers deal with this challenging change and what helps them to successfully transition from military to civilian life. This research unveils how resources support former child soldiers through transition.

For former child soldiers, transition thus commences subsequent to leaving the armed group, which implies distancing themselves from a frame of reference that had become definitive and involves a change in setting, role and living conditions. This may induce a sense of identity confusion (De Boeck & Honwana, 2005; Wessells, 2006) which in this study is expressed as persistent thoughts, feelings and behaviors related to child soldiering, and other people's approaches and reminders of this former state, which do not convene with the new living setting and its expectations. As known from previous research, stigmatization of former child soldiers is a widespread

phenomenon often related to psychological problems such as nightmares, reminiscent of the child soldier state (Vindevogel, Coppens, De Schryver, Loots, Broekaert, & Derluyn, 2012). In order to move forward, the participants experience a need to break entirely with this preceding state, not only physically but also symbolically. For this purpose, their progressive abstract reasoning allows to explore possibilities and imagine alternatives for the future beyond the concrete reality (Piaget, 1977), which help to distance themselves from their preceding state as child soldiers so as to open up the way for their subsequent state as citizens. In this study, resources are experienced to facilitate this demarcation by helping them to manage dire memories, feelings and attitudes, as well as troubled relationships with other people inherited from the child soldiering state. This finding magnifies previous research findings on the efforts former child soldiers make to forget about their past child soldiering experience and to break with the child soldier identity (Annan et al., 2009; Corbin, 2008; Veale & Stavrou, 2007). Questions may be raised about the long-term effectiveness and psychosocial impact of this cognitive avoidance strategy, but research has shown that former child soldiers who apply it often show less psychosocial distress – even over time (Boothby, Crawford, & Halperin, 2006; Jones, 2002). All this illustrates how the meaning of resources is related to detachment from a preceding state, typifying the onset of transition.

Subsequent to this detachment is a life stage limbo, betwixt and between the preceding state and the pending state, neither belonging to the former nor fitting into the latter (Eliade, 1958; Grimes, 2002; Turner, 1967; van Gennep, 1960). This is by anthropological theories on transition referred to as 'liminality' (Becker, 1999; Grimes, 2002; Turner, 1967; van Gennep, 1960). Dealing with this dissonance requires assignment of meaning to the new state by rethinking the own identity and role through the use of a renewed framework for making sense of the self and being in the world (Annan et al., 2009; Becker, 1999; De Boeck & Honwana, 2005; Grimes, 2002; Honwana, 2006; Shepler, 2005; Turner, 1967; van Gennep, 1960). Given the specific war-torn context and their dubious position in the conflict (Vindevogel, Coppens, Derluyn, De Schryver, Loots, & Broekaert, 2011), the former child soldiers in this study experience this state as creating hardship and emitting existential challenges, questioning their place and role in the new context and urging them to strive for their own survival. Thereby, resources help them to persevere and overcome this physically and psychologically demanding position. In this regard, prior studies point to interrelatedness, i.e. the better physical survival needs are fulfilled, the easier it is to psychologically deal with challenging conditions (Allwood,

Bell-Dolan, & Husain, 2002; Corbin, 2008; Cortes & Buchanan, 2007). Former child soldiers also encounter how boundaries between what is good and bad became blurred due to their child soldiering experience, and how the past identity as child soldiers does not conform to what is considered as appropriate within the new setting (Wessells, 2006). From a developmental perspective, this requires revision of the cognitive schemata that represent the understanding of the world, in order to obtain re-equilibration of the world view (Piaget, 1977). By facilitating the quest for altered indicators which they can accommodate to, resources help to create a frame of reference in what is a rather ambiguous condition. Such a frame of reference facilitates objectification, reflection and abstraction of the own actions that engender a growing awareness of what is right and justified (Piaget, 1977). As such, it supports their gaining insight into the 'good-bad' distinction and positioning themselves on the 'good' side, guiding the development of a conventional role and position (Honwana, 2006; Shepler, 2005). This eventually facilitates acceptance and hence enables reconnection and belonging to the new state (Annan et al., 2009; Corbin, 2008; Cortes & Buchanan, 2007). But according to the participants, a solely unidirectional effort by former child soldiers to get acquainted with the situation does not suffice as they also expect the environment and others to adjust to them and their presence in that situation. This corroborates consulted theories that consider transition as a communal process (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Geurts, 2002; Grimes, 2002) and child soldiering as a shared threshold for everyone involved (Annan et al., 2009; Wessells, 2006). Resources are thereby experienced as facilitating mutual adjustment efforts and reciprocal overtures, reducing the distance between former child soldiers and their environment, contributing to genuine supportive relationships and structures and eventually assisting the social inclusion of former child soldiers (Freiler, 2000; O'Reilly, 2005). This finding substantiates previous research that indicates the importance of close, sharing and caring relationships (Annan et al., 2009; Cortes & Buchanan, 2007). All this demonstrates that resources are beneficial in gradually retrieving a sense of identity and belonging in this transition process (Becker, 1999; Grimes, 2002).

This regained sense of identity and belonging enables unification of oneself with the new state and gradually also the accomplishment of transition (Turner, 1967; van Gennep, 1960). The incorporation of a renewed framework for meaning-making and the adoption of an altered position and role that are consequently created, allow meaning to be infused into the new state (De Vos, 1975; Casey, 1996; Grimes, 2002; Turner, 1967; van Gennep, 1960). Relative equilibrium is restored, which offers firm and safe ground

for development (Piaget, 1977; Turner, 1967). At this point, young people's increasing capability to think about hypothetical situations and to plan in a systematic and logical manner fosters inventiveness and empowerment for the further innovation of one's position and role (Becker, 1999; Piaget, 1977; van Gennep, 1960). Consummation of transition is therefore typified by orientation towards the future. This confirms preceding research findings that stress the importance of a sense of hope and future orientation in the lives of former child soldiers (Cortes & Buchanan, 2007). As the participants of this study express, resources support them in their aim of becoming who they want to be, self-actualized people and full members of society. Through the resources, they are able to progress in their life, both personally and socially. These findings amplify preceding research findings, indicating that resources promoting productiveness and thus progress facilitate the cultivation of a meaningful identity and role (Annan et al., 2009; Corbin, 2008; Lorey, 2001) which is under continuous development (Wessells, 2006).

This interdisciplinary conceptual framework of 'transition', essentially referring to gradually retrieving a sense of identity and belonging, converges with more advanced, broad ideas on the 'reintegration' of former child soldiers that encompass the process through which they transition into civil society and enter meaningful roles and identities as civilians, as for instance included in the Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups (2007, p.8). This research has revealed how resources may contribute to such personal development and social positioning in the wake of child soldiering, through facilitating the attainment of the four discerned valued ends: breaking with the past, being able to overcome challenges, belonging to the environment and becoming who you want to be. Developmental models explained that advanced cognitive abilities allow to deal with challenging change and thereby promote maturation, whereas anthropological models added that this is particularly successful when scaffolded by the environment and embedded in a communal process. Integration of these perspectives implies that the extent to which the cognitively valued ends/needs are contextually supported and satisfied contributes to growth and resilience (Ryan, 1995). This helps to conceptually unpack the complexity of resilient responses in the wake of child soldiering and enriches understanding of what contributes to successful transition of former child soldiers (Rutter, 2006). It further contributes to the area of concern by showing that support should essentially be oriented towards helping former child soldiers to develop civilian identities and find a meaningful social role, and hence to become functional in their society (Unicef, 2007; Wessells, 2006). The study findings

inform the design of more effective, sustainable and empowering initiatives that respect and reinforce meaningful and inherently pre-existing pathways towards resilience (Annan et al., 2009; Jareg, 2005; Kostelny, 2006; Tol, Jordans, Reis, & De Jong, 2009).

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7

Former child soldiers' transition trajectories from a warring faction to a war-affected society*

* Based on Vindevogel, S., Broekaert, E., & Derluyn, I. (submitted). Former child soldiers' transition trajectories from a warring faction to a war-affected society.

"War denies us
Luxury of forgetting
Forces us
To examine empty meaning"

Somewhere in a field |
Susan Nalugwa Kiguli

Abstract

The transition from military to civilian life involves change and adaptation, which is typically experienced as challenging for former child soldiers because it may defy and even outweigh their resources to offset ensuing distress. This study therefore aims to explore how former child soldiers' transition trajectories are shaped by the dynamic interplay between challenges and resources.

In-depth interviews, incorporating aspects of the Life-line Interview Method and Retrospective Interview Technique, were carried out with 48 northern Ugandan former child soldiers. Four of these interviews were as case studies further explored by applying interpretative phenomenological analysis.

The results display divergent trajectories in the wake of child soldiering, that show an erratic course and over time may show stability, improvement or decline. The cases indicated loss of unreplenishable resources, ongoing depletion of resources, and threat of the remaining resources when the challenges outweighed the resources of the participants. However, halting the depletion of resource loss, utilizing available resources or valuing remaining resources seem to offset distress.

This suggests the importance of a comprehensive approach of challenging and resourceful factors, and of their dynamic interaction that may lead to individual variations in the transition trajectories of former child soldiers. Approaches should further be oriented towards the prevention of resource loss sequelae and the strengthening of resource reservoirs.

7.1 Introduction

Young people who have been recruited as child soldiers experience transition after leaving the warring faction. Transition is generally regarded as a change process occurring at specific periods or turning points during the life course (Vogler, Crivello, & Woodhead, 2008). Such a change process entails a chain of consecutive events that are likely to require adaptation (Felner, Farber, & Primavera, 1983; Hobfoll, 1989). Hence, transition is typically experienced as challenging and potentially distressing because the change risks a loss of resources and the adaptation requires an investment of resources (Felner et al., 1983; Hobfoll, 1989). Pertaining to the case of former child soldiers, transition necessitates their adaptation to civilian life, its frameworks of meaning making and its customary practices, and challenges them to develop meaningful identities and roles as civilians (Vindevogel, Broekaert, & Derluyn, in press). In that process, former child soldiers may additionally encounter myriad challenges that emanate from their exposure to war-related adversity, destitute environmental conditions for human development that were induced or exacerbated by warfare, and structural factors that shape the stressful context of daily life in its aftermath (Vindevogel, De Schryver, Broekaert, & Derluyn, in press).

When enough resources are in stock to meet these challenges, distress may be counterbalanced (Felner et al., 1983; Hobfoll, 1989). Resources are generally defined as "those entities that either are centrally valued in their own right (e.g., self-esteem, close attachments, health, and inner peace), or act as a means to obtain centrally valued ends (e.g., money, social support, and credit)" (Hobfoll, 2002, p. 307). Resources are situated within individuals, their social environment, their culture and values, and the broader political and economic climate of their society (Psychosocial Working Group, 2002). Individuals are usually endowed with a great array of human capacities, including their mental and physical health, knowledge and skills, and livelihoods, among others. In addition, their environment is a rich reservoir of communal resources, such as social support, social services, religious and cultural frameworks, that can be invested in service of the collective and individual well-being (Vindevogel, Wessells, De Schryver, Broekaert, & Derluyn, 2012). A distinctive feature of resources is that they tend to move in 'caravan' (Hobfoll,1998), implying that certain resources appear to be related to other resources and that these may aggregate in resource gain cycles over time. Besides, resources can substitute for one other and be fitted to meet the experienced challenges

(Hobfoll & Lieberman, 1987; Hobfoll & Lilly, 1993; Layne, Beck, Rimmash, Southwick, Moreno, & Hobfoll, 2009).

Conservation of resources (COR) theory delineates that people have a natural propensity to strive to obtain and retain those things they value and therefore make active attempts to acquire and preserve resources (Hobfoll, 1989). The success of these attempts is enhanced if they are environmentally scaffolded, meaning that various informal and formal agents in this environment invest communal resources in service of people's well-being and act as a vehicle to obtain these communal resources (Hobfoll, Horsey, & Lamoureux, 2009). For instance, former child soldiers may be mentally troubled by their war-related experiences and therefore use a wide repertoire of cognitive-behavioural coping strategies to not succumb to the experienced distress. Within their community, caretakers may console them, friends can take them for relaxing leisure activities, elders may give advice on how to deal with distress, cleansing rituals may be performed in the community, and for those who experience profound and persistent distress, professional specialized counselling services might be organized (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2007). The extent to which such resources are available, fit with the experienced challenges, and are effectively used and transacted over the various levels testifies of resilience within a community and larger social ecology (Hobfoll et al., 2009; Layne et al., 2009; Psychosocial Working Group, 2002; Tol, Jordans, Reis & de Jong., 2009).

Situations of mass casualty, however, impinge severely on the resource reservoirs of affected settings and often lead to massive loss of resources in a community and wider society (Hobfoll et al., 2009; Masten, 2007). Warfare has the propensity to destabilize an entire social ecology, by rupturing familial and social networks, disrupting societal institutions and structures, undermining the socio-economic fabric, and eroding culture and morality, among other things (Miller & Rasco, 2004; Pedersen, 2002; Summerfield, 1996). Such systemic loss of communal resources also affects the individuals' resources and thus their ability to deal with encountered challenges (Boothby, Strang, & Wessells, 2006; Hobfoll et al., 2009). As such, the challenges associated with warfare and its aftermath may even cascade in resource loss spirals and in depletion of resources. In such cases, there is incongruity between the challenges and the resources to deal with the change (Miller & Rasco, 2004). Such incongruities may in the process of transition cumulate in causal chain effects that weight profoundly and persistently on the psychosocial well-being of former child soldiers (Rutter, 1994). When the challenges outweigh the available resources and lead to loss experiences, stress is likely to ensue (Hobfoll, 1989).

This study therefore aims to explore how formerly recruited young people's trajectories in the wake of child soldiering are shaped by the dynamic interplay between the challenges they encounter and the resources they experience, and the way in which they and their environments can or cannot maintain a balanced state that may either foster resilience or elicit distress (Boothby et al., 2006; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Hobfoll, 1998). Layne and colleagues (2007, 2009) outlined the typical trajectories of adjustment in the wake of adversity, including stress resistance, protracted recovery, severe persisting distress, stable maladaptive functioning and posttraumatic growth, among others. Furthermore, the basic tenets of COR-theory suggest that to understand the importance of significant life events, these events must be considered in the light of the resource loss and gain that they imply (Hobfoll, 2001). These theoretical frameworks form a useful lens through which to interpret the study findings on former child soldiers' transition trajectories, without intending to explicitly test these models and the hypotheses they generate. Exploring these dynamics in post-child soldiering trajectories is a useful step in untangling the complex intertwining of challenge and resource factors and the processes that promote resilience of former child soldiers (Layne et al., 2009).

7.2 Method

7.2.1 Participants

The study was conducted in Lira district in northern Uganda, an area that was seriously affected by a long-lasting and complex armed conflict in which the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) forcibly recruited tens of thousands of minors as child soldiers (Blattman & Annan, 2008). The sample of this study was extracted from a larger stratified random sample of 1,008 northern Ugandan young people, who completed a questionnaire inquiring among other things whether they had been abducted by the LRA and whether they were willing to be further interviewed.

To extract the smaller sample for this study, stratified random sampling was applied to the group of participants who answered both questions affirmatively. None refused to participate, constituting a sample of 48 participants, of whom 25 are male and 23 female, with an average age of 17 years. The majority originated from Lira district, while the others resided here for familial, educational or economic reasons. About half of them attended school, others either worked – mostly in farming – or did not have any occupation. The median duration of LRA captivity was one and a half

years, ranging from a few days to eighteen years. One participant had been recruited twice and one participant tree times. At the time of interviewing, the median duration of return from the LRA was approximately five years, ranging from one to nine years.

Since this study aimed to examine the variety and complexity of the trajectories and to gain a deep understanding of their course, a subset of cases was selected to study more in-depth in accordance with the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) method (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). For this reason, purposive sampling of a small maximum variation sample (Marshall, 1996; Patton, 2001; Smith et al., 2009) occurred, implying that for each of the emergent trajectories (infra), a case was selected that provided a rich account of the trajectory (Smith et al., 2009). An overview of the cases is provided in table 1. Pseudonyms are used throughout the study to preserve the anonymity of the participants.

Table 1: Overview case studies

Pseudonym	Trajectory	Sex	Age	Duration of captivity	Duration time since return
Isaac	Type 1	Male	15	± 1 year	± 4 years
Bonny	Type 2	Male	15	± 3 months	± 5 years
Martha	Type 3	Female	18	± 1 year	± 7 years
Proscovia	Type 4	Female	16	± 10 years	± 1 year

7.2.2 Procedure

All data were collected by the first author over a three-month period of fieldwork from October to December 2010. The study design was approved by the Ethical Committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of Ghent University, as well as by the Resident District Commissioner of Lira, the school principals and LC1 chairpersons. The written informed assent or consent of the participants was obtained after providing them the required information to make an informed decision about refusal or approval to participate. Verbal informed assent or consent was also obtained to tape-record the voices of the participants.

An individual retrospective in-depth interview was designed to evoke stories about momentous life experiences during the transition from military life in the rebel group to civilian life in the society. The interview, lasting approximately two to three hours, mainly consisted of semi-structured, open-ended questions that inquired into the participants' transition process, starting at the moment of departure from the rebel group up until the interview. This data collection method invited the participants to offer a rich, detailed, first-person account of their experiences and to

engage in fuller, deeper disclosure, which is required to conduct IPA (Smith et al., 2009).

To facilitate this reconstruction exercise for the participant, the interview integrated aspects of the Retrospective Interview Technique (RIT) that allows a cross-sectional design to elicit longitudinal data (Huston, Surra, Fitzgerald, & Cate, 1981). The participant was asked to assign a 'happiness'-score on a scale with range 0-10, to four discerned moments related to their child soldiering experience: shortly before their abduction by the LRA (pre), during their time with the LRA (peri), shortly after returning from the LRA (post) and the period of interviewing (present). To elicit well thought-out scores, the participant was requested to motivate why (s)he chose a certain score for that period and what were the differences with other periods of the trajectory. These 'happiness'-scores represented a straightforward measure and local idiom of well-being (Aber & Jones, 1995; Ben-Arieh, 2010; Rasmussen, Katoni, Keller, & Wilkinson, 2011). Based on these consecutive scores, a graph was plotted to represent the participant's sense of well-being at several points in the trajectory, to verify whether the overall pattern represented the perception of relative change over time. In addition, the interview was based on the Life-line Interview Method (LIM), which has frequently been used in diverse contexts to obtain autobiographical information about life events (Assink & Schroots, 2010; Arzy, Adi-Japha, & Blanke, 2009). Since the case studies aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the factors and processes that contributed to the course of the transition from the military to civilian life, the analysis is focused on the post-child soldiering trajectory (post - present). Accordingly, the participant was stimulated to situate significant life events on a timeline representing their transition period and to tell their own life-story on basis of this visualized reconstruction. These events were significant for these negatively influenced and thus exacerbated the situation (challenges) or positively altered and hence improved the situation (resources). The participants were also asked to assign a valence (positive or negative) and name to each represented life event. The results of the LIM are depicted in the results-section for the selected cases (fig. 4-7). These techniques allowed visual sense-making as a means of revealing the participant's lived experiences of post-child soldiering transition.

7.2.3 Analysis

In order to structure the data of the 48 interviews and to explore different types of transition trajectories in these data, the trajectories were empirically identified on the basis of the participants' RIT-graphs. To

explore the number of different types of trajectories, seven partition based cluster analyses (K-means) were performed. After each cluster analysis, a MANOVA was performed to estimate Wilk's Lambda, which was then plotted against the seven cluster solutions. The scree plot (fig. 1) showed an 'elbow' on *k*=4, indicating that four clusters or types of trajectories was a good solution. These four types of trajectories are depicted in figure 2. It should be noted here that the primary aim was not to create or test a typology of trajectories, but to facilitate the further analysis of the data. This clustering allowed to identify the participants nested within each trajectory (fig. 3).

Figure 1: Scree plot of Wilk's Lambda plotted against the seven cluster solutions

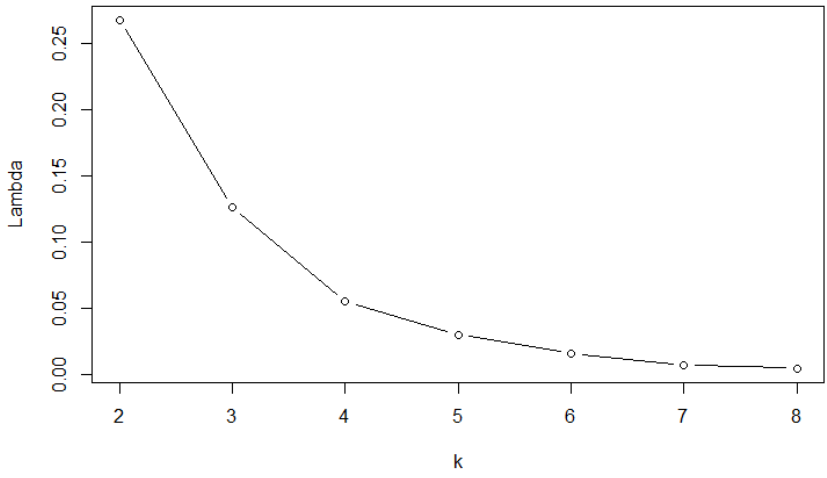
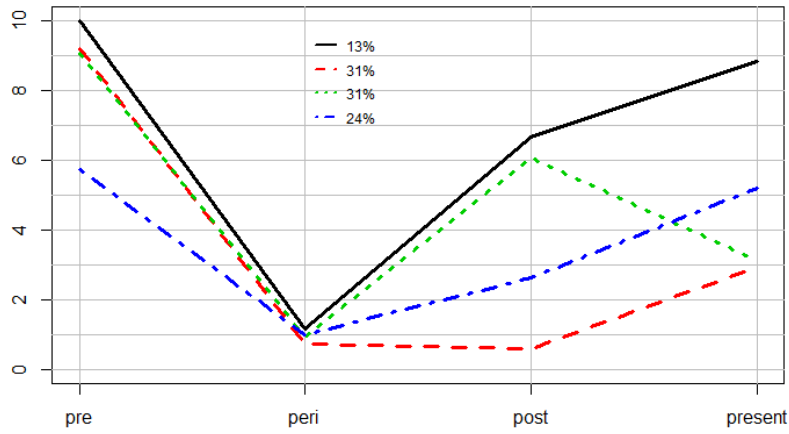


Figure 2: Trajectory means for pre, peri, post and present happiness



For each discerned type of trajectory, the verbatim transcription of a case study was analyzed to explore the elements and dynamics that were associated with the course of the post-child soldiering trajectory (post – present). For this purpose, the ideographic case-study approach to interpretative-phenomenological analysis (IPA) was adopted. IPA is a systematic, detailed, phenomenologically-oriented approach to the interpretation of how participants make sense of their lived experiences (Smith, 1999; Smith et al., 2009; Van Manen, 1990). IPA was applied for each case separately, but the analytic process and the resulting themes and structures helped to orient the subsequent analyses (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

The first phase of the method consisted of the reading and rereading of each interview transcript. The central questions that guided the reading process were: 1) what are the experiences that matter for the participant, and what are the key features of these experiences?, 2) what is the meaning of these experiences for the participants, why are these meaningful?, 3) what is the position and role of these experiences in the broader transition process? While reading, first interpretations were annotated (left margin). As a second phase in this process, experiential themes were written down next to the text fragments they applied to. To stay close to the participant's meaning-making and conceptualization, the themes reflected the participant's phrasing as explicitly recorded during the interview (italic in right margin). Next, these themes were interpreted in the light of the research question and renamed on a higher abstraction level, leading to super-ordinate themes (right margin). The third phase of the analysis consisted of the development of a structure, by looking for meaningful patterns and connections between the themes, thereby largely following the line of the participant's narrative (arrows in right margin). Nonetheless, interpretation of these themes and structure is sought beyond the level of the participant's experiential account in the light of the researchers' theoretical background (Eatough & Smith, 2006; Smith et al., 2009).

Memos were kept about these analytical decisions to facilitate further analysis and reporting. The entire analytic process occurred manually, instead of by use of a computer-assistant qualitative data analysis software, in order to analyze each rich ideographic account in its totality (Webb, 1999). Given that IPA is an iterative process in which one moves back and forth between the different analytic phases (Smith et al., 2009), these three phases were revisited until the integrity of the participant's account was ensured. For the purpose of clarification and transparency, an example of this process is depicted in table 2. Each case is reported as a case study in its own right, in order to do justice to the dynamism between the challenges

and resources and the rich data obtained for each participant (Smith et al., 2009).

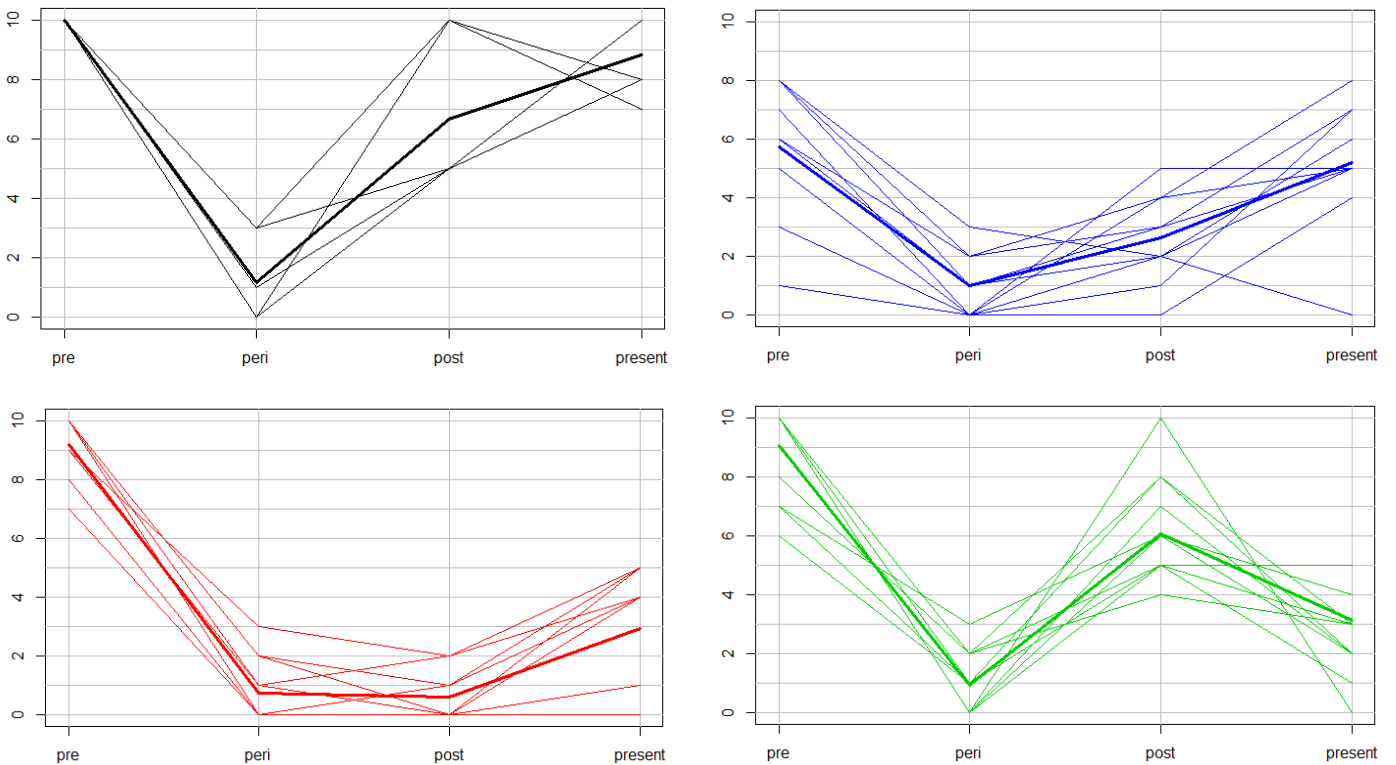
Table 2: Example of the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Experiential notes	**Text fragment**	**Themes & structure**	**Super-ordinate themes**
	Q: Can you explain how it was like for you to arrive in the trading centre where you lived before?		
Not knowing anyone	A: My life was not easy since I had expected to get people at their homes, and when I reached, I found all people crowed in this trading centre. I didn't know anyone and did not know where my relatives were. I did not know where to go and where people had shifted to or were sleeping, because even in the verandas of houses, people were just sleeping there. So it was really hard for me to find where my relatives were. I resorted just to sit down at a place where a group of children were playing, I just sat there quietly because I did not know where to go.	Loss of community structure ↓ Loss of parents and home ↓ Feeling lost, *"no one to stay with"*	Ongoing depletion of resources
Not finding relatives			
Not knowing where to go or stay			
	Q: What is making you unhappy these days?		
Lack of money, blocks access to school	A: I am not going to school. There is no money.	Lack of capital ↓ Lack of access to school, "*no school*" ↓ Lack of opportunities to create relationships ↓ Lack of opportunities to receive support ↑ Using opportunities in the community "*playing*"	Ongoing depletion of resources
	Q: Why is being out of school making you unhappy?		
Blocks access to relationships with many people	A: If you are going to school, you are known to very many people. Everywhere you go, you find friends.		
	Q: Why is it good to know many people?		
Blocks access to help that these people might offer	A: They help you when you have problems. If you know very many people, anyone can just come and help you.		
	A: What is helping you to deal with this?		
Staying together with friends in the village	Q: I have some friends who don't go to school. If I am thinking about those things, I go and play with those friends in this village who are not going to school. So we meet and sit together to play Omweso to keep us busy and then you don't realize that time is going, and by the time you finish playing everyone who went to school is already back home.		Utilizing available resources
Playing games to make time fly			

7.3 Results

Four general types of trajectories were derived from the RIT graphs and K-means analysis (fig 3).

Figure 3: Four types of transition trajectories (clockwise: trajectory 1, trajectory 2, trajectory 3, trajectory 4)

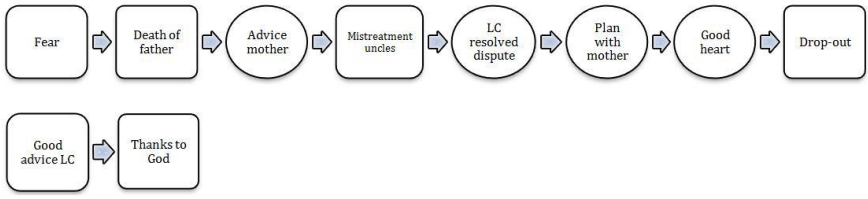


7.3.1 Trajectory 1

The first emergent trajectory is a pattern of initial high happiness, which was significantly interrupted during the period of child soldiering, but then was expeditiously restored to a level nearly equalling and gradually more approaching the initial happiness level. In the course of the trajectory, a homeostatic balance at a high happiness level is thus obtained for most participants showing this trajectory. Some participants' trajectory pattern showed a slight decline towards the end, but their happiness level remained at a relatively high level. The trajectory of the participant who reported three child soldiering episodes showed an erratic course, whereby the happiness fluctuated between high and low scores that were altered by the different child soldiering episodes, but eventually reached a current level of happiness that equalled the level before the first period of child soldiering. This pattern represents the trajectory of approximately a sixth of the participants in this study.

7.3.1.1 Case study

Figure 4: Isaac's challenges (rectangle) and resources (oval) on the life line (LIM)



Isaac had been held captive for about a year and managed to escape during one of the massacres carried out by the LRA, after which he was detained for some days in the government army's checkpoint before heading to his village again. The analysis of his trajectory clearly shows the intertwining of, on the one hand, challenges that tended to threaten his well-being and, on the other, the presence and utilization of resources that considerably helped to offset distress and prevent loss sequelae. The resources were generated by himself and by support figures against the backdrop of a larger supportive community. These intrinsically motivated and externally proffered resources thus worked in tandem and helped Isaac to tackle the encountered challenges. This helps to understand how he expeditiously gained happiness on a high level.

Halting the depletion of resources: making plans

A point of interest with regard to the studied dynamic between challenges and resources is that, despite confrontation with considerable challenges subsequent to his departure from the LRA, Isaac portrayed himself as an enterprising person who tried to come to grips with his life and to facilitate the improvement of his situation. The proactive search for opportunities and deliberate plan plotting enabled him at certain points in his transition to halt the deterioration of his situation. This became apparent in the way he had planned to deceive the LRA commanders and thereby managed to escape from them. He also managed to escape from the government soldiers when he was detained in their barracks, by seizing the opportunities that were created to execute his plan of feigning compliance to their orders but instead liberating himself. Later in the community, he sensed that the community members had a negative attitude towards him, so he decided to do something about it to recuperate and halt this loss of social support. He asked his mother to invite the closest neighbours to their house, told them what happened to him and asked them to stop fearing him. As he had expected, the story transferred to other neighbours and soon people interacted again fearlessly with him. Hence, by making plans, Isaac deliberately gave direction to his own trajectory in the aftermath of his departure from the LRA. He mostly succeeded in his plans, which was attributed to his enterprising abilities and the support he found for his plans in his environment. Even when he did not succeed or could not halt the further depletion of his resources, he remained determined to keep planning for the future, as the following extract on his return to school illustrates:

> *"I begun digging in our garden and selling the things that we harvested from the garden to pay the school fee. When the money was not enough, I or sometimes my mother would go and beg the head teacher to allow me as a day scholar and we promised to pay in parts like that. He had a good heart and allowed me to school, even if I had not cleared the balance. But it became very hard for us, especially that time when we did not have harvest, which caused me to experience very many problems in school. I had to sit the same term again, could not come back for another term, and not sit for examinations, so I dropped out of school up to now. I was feeling so bad because of that, even nowadays, because I feel that I should continue with school because I have the capacities. I don't want to become a thief. I'd rather go to school and become independent so that I can work on the improvement of my standard of living."*

Utilizing available resources: combining hands

Another leading thread running through Isaac's transition trajectory alluded to the fruitful combination of the presence of support figures/a supportive environment and Isaac's ability to perceive these commodities as opportunities and to convert them into resources. Isaac narrated that upon his arrival in the community, his presence evoked fear for violent acts in many community members, even in his own mother. He consulted the LCI chairman of the community, who negotiated with his mother and promoted their reconciliation. The LCI chairperson continued to play an important role in the transition of Isaac, because he governed a harmonious community and was available to help his civilians whenever he could. Isaac repeatedly solicited his support when he and his mother were confronted with challenges that defied their own capacities. This occurred, for instance, when the late father's relatives mistreated them and claimed the father's legacy. Isaac took the case to his LCI chairman, who assembled the traditional restorative meeting and successfully mediated between the family members. In such cases, Isaac's personal initiative was amplified by the support that he found in his environment, which increased the aspired beneficial effects. The good relationship Isaac had with his mother and the LCI chairman of his community also helped him to remain courageous in the face of years without education. Recently, the chairman had proposed to work together to collect money for paying his school fees, which gave Isaac hope for returning to school. He clarified that he had learned the importance of staying close to supportive people, because it gave him access to their love and good advices, which were valued in their own right, but in turn also engendered courage and hope for the future, which were valued ends for Isaac. Isaac also anticipated the maintenance of his relationships and assurance of future accessibility of the support that was generated through these relationships, as appears from the following extract:

> *"I respect my parent and the elders in our community. I respect them because, like when I fall sick, my mother and even the elders can take me for treatment, depending on how I behave, whether I conduct myself respectful for them."*

Valuing remaining resources: counting the blessings

Throughout Isaac's narrative, profound gratefulness stood out. An important source of strength was life, which after all he went through had become far from self-evident. As a result, he did not take life for granted but felt he owed a debt of gratitude to his mother and God. Many of the experiences that shaped this trajectory were interpreted in the light of

religion. For instance, when observing that his father had been killed by the rebels, Isaac realized that there was a challenging journey ahead of the family, because the loss of the breadwinner in the household inevitably implied the loss of many other resources the family was previously endowed with. Although he was disappointed and sad, he said that a sense of gratefulness prevailed because at least his mother remained with whom he could share and plan together. This testified of Isaac's courage and optimism to see the best in his situation.

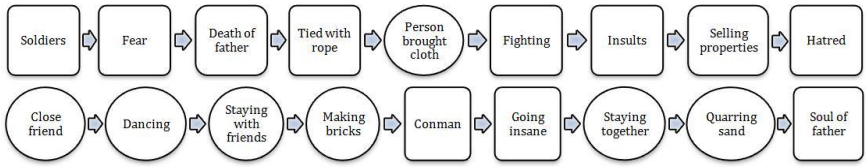
> *"I had nothing to do but only to thank God for keeping one parent alive and not kill both of my parents, because I am the second born and the eldest boy because I follow a girl and girls leave the home when they get married. So that meant that if my mother had not been there, I was the one supposed to take care for my family. But there would have been no way, I did not know how I would keep my brothers. So it was good that our mother remained because now I could share the problems together with her, now we could still sit together and do something together for the family. Realizing this caused a positive change into my life."*

7.3.2 Trajectory 2

The second trajectory is characterized by a medium happiness level in the period before child soldiering, followed by a seemingly initial decline during child soldiering, after which the happiness level gradually increased again to a comparable level as before. Most of these trajectories are typified by a slow and steady progress toward the initial happiness level. However, some are also found to have higher happiness-scores in the current period than those found prior to child soldiering, showing growth in their happiness level. One trajectory is characterized by an overall low happiness level during all periods of the trajectory with a decline in the current happiness level. The participant who was recruited twice reported a long stable period of low happiness during and after the child soldiering episodes, with the exception that a considerable higher score was chosen to represent the current happiness. A common feature of all these patterns is that they show a relatively stable course on a medium happiness level, during which the initial level is eventually recovered. This depicts the trajectory of a quarter of the participants of this study.

7.3.2.1 Case study

Figure 5: Bonny's challenges (rectangle) and resources (oval) on the life line (LIM)



After having spent some months with the rebels, Bonny had decided to surrender himself during a fight with the government soldiers in hopes of being rescued. He first spent some days in the government soldiers' barracks where he was harshly treated. Thereafter he was taken to his aunt in town, from where he was later connected to his parental home. Bonny's trajectory initially represented a causal chain effect of loss that culminated in the loss of his senses, which might explain the initial low happiness. But the incessant support and unfolding opportunities that resulted out of his social relationships gradually strengthened him to alter some of the encountered threats and counterbalance loss, which in turn engendered a causal chain effect of gain that was able to partially replenish the initially depleted resources and contributed to a marked increase of his happiness. This made Bonny to summarize his transition as follows: '*it was most time happiness but once in a while also trouble and sadness, but not so much, only in the beginning*'.

Ongoing depletion of resources: losing senses

Bonny recounted several episodes of 'losing his senses', which were evoked by external triggers that he appraised as distressing and which often made him to run off. This formed a leading thread through the onset of his transition trajectory. Following the reunification with his aunt in town, Bonny continued to feel snapped at the heels by the rebels and narrated that the gunshots he heard in town made him belief the rebels were coming after him, for which he fled the place. This motivated the family to take him back to the mother who had sought refuge in a camp. Bonny narrated that his father had been killed by the rebels during his absence, a loss that he had failed to process and that remained unbearable for him. Ever since his mother told him about his father's death and he recalled the loss, it made him want to return to the rebels to revenge his father's death but he repeatedly ended up roaming in the streets without knowing what he was doing. He also narrated that reminders about his father evoked recurrent daydreams and that his father was always visiting him in his dreams at

night. He declared to have intrusive suicidal thoughts that time. The evoked inner emotions often also translated into aggressiveness towards other people. Bonny felt that some people associated his aggressiveness with rebel behaviours, for which they inflicted insults and threats on him. This represents a causal chain effect of loss: loss of father → emotional processing difficulty → unconscious acts → aggressive behaviour → insults. During other episodes of loss of senses, he had sold all the family's properties, had given assets to a conman, and other acts which later got him into trouble. Remarkably is that Bonny strongly emphasized that he was not conscious of his acts because it made him fail to reason well.

> *"There were times when I was going out of my senses and started beating other children. I didn't know what I was doing, I would just find myself doing that. There were times that I even realized myself that I was again beating someone who was innocent, I did not know what I was doing. Then I immediately dropped the stick down and felt so sorry for that person that I was beating. Then I began crying and ran to my house.*
>
> What exactly do you mean by going out of senses?
>
> *When I go out of senses, I feel that my head is so heavy and very many things are happening inside there. I then begin doing things that I am not even conscious about. The memories about the rebels killing people and how we were also made to kill other people come into my mind. It comes and blocks my reasoning."*

Valuing remaining resources: unremitting support

What is remarkable throughout Bonny's trajectory is the unremitting loyalty and unconditional support that he experienced from people, which were crucial resources for him. In the period when he often fled away from home, he always got people who had been searching for him and brought him back. To prevent such disappearances, however, the family had soon decided to tie Bonny with a rope inside the house, reportedly for about three years. Relatives and neighbours kept on visiting the house to encourage and advise him, even strangers came to donate basic requirements. He felt that this made him gain loads of strength. A point of interest here is how Bonny created a narrative that enabled him to make sense out of the episode when he was locked in the house. Emerging out of this state left him feeling grateful and appreciative of life. He felt that the incessant support and encouragement of people had prevented his return to the rebels and his suicide. As a result, a deep appreciation for life and for the fact that people had saved his life began to stand out. Moreover, he found it rather

unexpectedly that, despite the unfair treatment he sometimes gave them, some people did not give up on him and kept on providing support.

> *"People came to me and talked to me, that I should not worry about my father, that my father had gone but that I could still do something good for our future. The good advice I got from these people helped me to stop overthinking the death of my father. Eventually my relatives found that I was fine and even I also found that I was getting better because of this advice. I was happy that time, even though I had been tied. If it were not because of that, I would have killed myself because it would be hard for me to live like that any longer. I would have taken poison and would be dead by now."*

Utilizing available resources: unfolding opportunities

Bonny's transition further indicated that he utilized his relationships with support figures to gain access to more opportunities. As in Isaac's trajectory, there was thus a good fit between the commodities of the environment and Bonny's initiative to utilize these commodities as resources. Bonny was aware that his aggressiveness had evoked negative social attitudes and therefore formed a threat to his relationships with other people. For that reason, he mostly tried to stay away from people when he felt the aggressiveness was rising, and he also contacted his uncle whom he knew could calm him down easily. His uncle was an important support figure who facilitated the access to other resources, not only because he contributed to the welfare of the family in terms of basic requirements, but also because he knew how to handle Bonny and gave good advises that helped him to stay out of trouble. His uncle had also introduced him to the reverent and they organized prayers for Bonny when he lost his senses. By doing that, his uncle promoted and facilitated Bonny's religiosity, through which he discovered a new source of strength. This represents a chain of resource gain: ask support to uncle → uncle connects to reverent → organization of prayers → religiosity → inner strength. Moreover, Bonny's mother had always stimulated him to stay together with other people and to create friendships, as she did not want him to stay alone indoor. Bonny had created one close friend who had always stayed together with him and who tried to connect Bonny to his own friends. Bonny seized this opportunity to gain the friendship of these people mainly by telling stories, performing funny dances and cracking jokes to entertain people and make them like him. His friends had complimented him on his good dance style, and this appreciation had boosted Bonny's confidence to stay among other people. Besides, his friends always informed him about job opportunities and invited him to work together with them to earn some money. As such,

Bonny developed supportive relationships that facilitated his access to more resources and engendered further gain sequelae in his trajectory: mother stimulates friendships → close relationship with one friend → connected to other people → dancing and entertaining → gaining appreciation and new friendships → invited to work together → money.

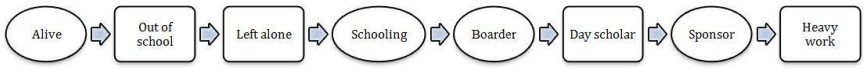
> *"I like staying with people because they make me happy. We share everything together. If you always stay with someone and you need something, they cannot refuse to help you. Besides, it is also good to do things together instead of alone, it is less tiresome."*

7.3.3 Trajectory 3

The third trajectory is characterized by the highest fluctuation over time. The pattern started with a high level of happiness before child soldiering, but this level greatly declined during child soldiering. The post-child soldiering period typically showed an initial partial or full restoration and a marked increase of the happiness level for a limited period, but over time this level deteriorated and eventually declined in most cases, or remained stable and indicated homeostasis at a moderate level in some other cases. This pattern represents the trajectory of almost a third of the participants in this study.

7.3.3.1 Case study

Figure 6: Martha's challenges (rectangle) and resources (oval) on the life line (LIM)



Martha had been abducted when she was about 10 years old, during a raid on the village where she lived with her parents. During that raid, her parents had also been captured, but she had not seen or heard from them again while she was in LRA captivity. After having spent one year with the rebels, she was rescued by the government soldiers during an attack on the LRA base where she resided. Her trajectory shows that upon return from the LRA, challenges might have not been encountered or might have been overshadowed by the serendipitous encounters that constituted resources to offset the challenges, whereas these challenges started to develop or become more significant over time due to the possible unsustainability or uncertainty of the resources. Martha concluded "*there were small problems*

but not to compare to those I experience today". This clarifies the initial increase of happiness upon return and gradual decline of it over time.

Valuing remaining resources: a serendipitous start off

The onset of Martha's trajectory is typified by a chain of unexpected but opportune events, which enhanced her appreciation of her situation in the wake of child soldiering. Because of the serendipitous break from the rebels, Martha did not know what to expect about her return home, but she revealed that her expectation depicted a grim outlook. She soon became aware that, against all odds, she had been able to leave the LRA-base alive and therefore developed gratitude for the life she still had, as was also seen in Bonny's trajectory. The government soldiers brought her to an Interim Care Centre. Martha narrated how her stay in the centre was an unexpected surprise and she explained that she gained many resources there. Martha had also expected to have lost both of her parents, because she did not know what the rebels had done to them. When she was discharged from the centre and brought to her community, she was warmly welcomed by the community members. They had called a pastor to preach for her at her home. She explained how rereading the verses that he preached strengthened her up to today. To her surprise, she also found out that her mother was still alive, which helped her to deal with the loss of her father who had been killed. These supports made her happiness increase considerably upon her homecoming and showed to be a great source of strength throughout her trajectory.

> *"It was easy to stay at the centre. We would just sit, they would cook for us, we were not overmoving, no hard work, no beating like they did to us in the bush. So I felt it was easy to stay there. They kept me well and the wounds on me cured because they worked on it. They also taught me how to live at home and how to stay with the people in the community.*
> What has helped you the most?
> *The ideas they give me, and the counselling they organized there. They told me that when I get back home, I should respect my parents, not move aimlessly to go and see the relatives but just stay at home to get used to the parents again. It also helped because we were told that we should not overtell what happened to us in the past and also not overthink what happened, so to make us forget about the past."*

Unreplenishable lost resources: rising pressure

In the longer term, however, the unexpected presence of the mother did not appear to be a full-strength antidote for the difficulty of living without her

father. The loss of the bread winner of the household went hand in hand with the loss of capital in the family, which her mother and she could not recuperate, despite their efforts to work hard to generate income. This evoked many thoughts about her late father who would have been better able to care for her, and made her drenched in deep sadness over time. This situation also imposed a high burden of work on Martha's shoulders. As the firstborn of the family, she was challenged with the task of providing income and care for the family members, in cooperation with her mother. This hard work in turn evoked physical complaints, which she had also experienced during child soldiering when being overloaded with physically exhausting tasks. These complaints therefore often made her recall experiences from the past with the LRA. Martha said that to cope up with these thoughts, she used to cry or to fight people but lately only tried to ignore these thoughts, although this did not change much about her situation. This illustrates the development of a causal chain effect of loss: loss of father → loss of income → lack of basic requirements → lack of school fees → altering episodes of education → hard work → physical complaints → recalling past experiences. In Martha's view, each of these loss experiences were magnified by one another, as she explained in the following observation:

> *"If my father were there, he would be the one providing what I lack at the moment, but now that he is not there I am lacking certain basic things and that makes life difficult. For example, when I am at home and I want something, and then I am told by my mother that she cannot get it and can't provide it for me, then I begin to think about my father who could have provided, and I start wishing he was there for us. Then I can get annoyed and start to cry."*

Threatened remaining resources: altering episodes of schooling

The greater part of the themes on the life-line were strongly related to schooling. Martha's trajectory was typified by the alternating loss or gain of access to school and its inherent resources. After her return to the community, Martha had to stay at home for a while before continuing with her studies, unlike her friends, which evoked a strong sense of being left alone. Martha persuaded her mother to take her to school, who consented and allowed her to attend a free government school in the village. Hence, Martha's initiative was supported by her environment and therefore was successful. Since then, she had mostly been able to attend school, either as a day scholar or as a boarder. Especially being a boarder was highly valued since it offered more opportunities to stay together with friends and to concentrate on the studies, unlike at home where she had to work a lot instead. Episodes at the boarding school had been possible after the family

had worked hard and generated enough money for school fees, and after she had been selected by an NGO for a scholarship. However, even though the school fees had been paid, Martha's family was left with the challenge to provide money for scholastic materials, uniforms, and transport to school. This shows that the experienced resources did not suffice to compensate the loss she had experienced, which threatened her access to school. Moreover, the array of resources accessed through schooling became severely endangered, which involved the threat of future loss and was highly distressing. The advantages of schooling and what she now risked to lose was described in the following extract:

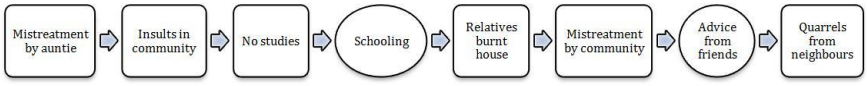
> *"At school, I relate with friends and that makes my life easy. Most of the time I am with friends here and that makes me forget and not flash back anytime about what has happened. When I am alone and annoyed by that, those thoughts can still come once in a while. And besides, continuing with my studies will give me that easy life, not that hard time I have at home."*

7.3.4 Trajectory 4

The fourth trajectory to emerge represents a pattern of initial high happiness, that was considerably disrupted by child soldiering and that in its aftermath remained relatively stable on a level that is seemingly lower than the initial happiness level. In most cases, a slight decrease in happiness is noticeable in the wake of child soldiering compared to the period of child soldiering, but then a slight growth trend is observed in the end, albeit on a low happiness level. This pattern is representative of the trajectories of a quarter to a third of the participants in this study.

7.3.4.1 Case study

Figure 7: Proscovia's challenges (rectangle) and resources (oval) on the life line (LIM)



From the beginning onwards, Proscovia appeared markedly emotional and the interview was recurrently intermitted because she burst into tears. Proscovia had been abducted by LRA rebels at the age of 5 years, together with her brother and mother. By that time, her father had lost his life in the war. While her mother had managed to escape after some years of captivity, Proscovia and her brother remained in LRA captivity for ten years until they

saw an opportunity to execute their long-planned escape and broke away from the rebel group together. Proscovia's account described a sequence of resentment and rejection by her family and community members, that brought along cascading loss and eventually depletion of support and assets to rebuild her life. The degree and toxicity of these experiences culminated to a point where the perception *'nobody wants us around'* prevailed. All this blocked the opportunities to recover the loss or to gain new resources that could bring a change in the situation and make up the arrears.

Ongoing depletion of resources : recurrent social rejection

Unlike her expectations, Proscovia did not have a positive homecoming experience. In hopes of finding her mother at their original home, she and her brother returned straight to that community but found out that the brothers to the father had chased her mother away and instead occupied the ancestral land and the house. Whereas it is a culturally construed restorative practice in Uganda that the uncles take over the care for the family members of their late brother, in this case they only laid claim to the inheritance and thereby even deprived the family from the remaining resources. Left with little options, Proscovia and her brother decided to turn to other relatives while continuing the search for their mother. Initially, they continued their journey to the house of the maternal grandmother, but found out that she had passed away years ago. They then decided to walk up to their aunt's place, where they were initially welcomed before the aunt changed her mind and dismissed them because it was hard to care for them. Proscovia then went to another aunt, where she was reunited with her mother. She described that reunification as a time of intense joy, a beacon of hope and energy. It had also motivated her mother to build a house for her family on the land they inherited from the late father. Nonetheless, Proscovia continued to face hard life in that community, where she felt that she and her brother were not wanted. Despite their efforts to fit into the family and the community where they resided, they failed to gain acceptance. When the house was almost finalized, the relatives of the father burnt it and chased them away from that community. Since the family had lost all their assets and money and was no longer welcome in their community, they had no other option than to move to town and rent a house there. Since the family was poor and could not always pay the rent, they were often thrown out of their house until they could pay the debts. Their neighbours regarded them as refugees and therefore insulted the family. This represented a causal chain of loss since her return: loss of father → expropriation by relatives of late father → destruction of house by relatives → loss of assets, land and house → lack of money for rent → loss of status in

community → being insulted. She then described the efforts they undertook to bring justice, and the disappointment wherein these unrewarding efforts resulted. Unlike in the other case studies, the investment of efforts to improve the situation failed to result in recuperation or gain because they were not supported but instead inhibited by the environment. This failure to gain resources and the further loss they experienced accumulated to a point where a sense of helplessness prevailed.

> *"We tried several times to take the relatives to the clan leaders, but still... the clan leaders are always prejudiced. When we took the relatives to the clan meeting, they just bribed them with alcohol and so they turned everything down. We even went to the police but when the police called the clan members and the relatives, they refused to come and the police left it like that. So we think now that keeping quiet is better."*

Unreplenishable lost resources: inaccessible opportunities

School also formed an important thread throughout Proscovia's trajectory. Since her return, she experienced alternating episodes of schooling, but most of the time she had not been able to attend school due to a lack of money to pay the required school fees. Episodes of schooling often ended in dismissal from school because the family was unable to continue paying the school fees. Proscovia felt that the consequences of warfare and the cascading loss of their livelihood and assets made school inaccessible for her, which in turn excluded her from the further support provided there and which provoked other difficulties in her life that she could not address in any other way. She felt that this blocked her opportunities in life.

> *"When I am at home, every time I think about the problems that we have because of this war. I always feel that it's only me who was affected by the war. And then, because of that war, I am the only one who dropped out and is not going to school, yet my friends are going. I am always wondering 'why is it that others are schooling?' and then I realize 'because they were not affected, they were not abducted'. I just sit here and see people going to school. This makes me feel so bad."*

Utilizing available resources: scarce supports

Although the experiences of loss clearly outweighed the resources in Proscovia's trajectory, a beacon of happiness was found in the few relationships she had and in religiosity, which might have contributed to an eventual slight increase in her happiness. However, it is clear that the

available resources do not suffice to tackle the formidable loss of resources she experiences during the course of her transition.

> *"I feel happy when I am with my friends. Some take me well but others don't because their parents keep telling them that they should not stay with me because I still have the manners of the bush and that I will spoil them. I only have two good friends who are good to me, because they always talk to me when I am in problems and advise me that I should not keep on recalling what happened to me in the past. At times I also go for the youths day. That is making me happy because people are many there and you can stay together like in a congregation, I feel good when I am there. Besides, pastors preach there and that strengthens me. When I am there, I forget about the problems I have now and the thoughts I have about the bush."*

7.4 Discussion

This study aimed to explore how former child soldiers' transition trajectories are shaped by the dynamic interplay between challenges and resources, hereby taking into account aspects of and interaction with the social ecology in which the individual's life is embedded. For this purpose, a first step comprised the analysis of the RIT-graphs of the participants and the types of trajectories that emerged. The four emergent types represent some of the trajectories that have been consistently identified and conceptualized in broader post-adversity adjustment research (Layne et al., 2007; 2009; Masten & Obradovic, 2007). Within this framework, the first trajectory is conceptualized as 'expeditious recovery'. Isaac's trajectory is understood in terms of effective early and sustainable responses of the system, whereby depleted resources are effectively replenished to alleviate strain and prevent further loss, which enables full recovery of the pre-status. The second emergent trajectory is conceptualized as 'protracted recovery'. The case of Bonny is understood in the light of initially inadequate or slower responses of the system due to the loss of resources with limited replenishability, ongoing adversity and loss experiences, which result in a more gradual restoration of the pre-status. The third trajectory that was identified in this study does not fit exactly in that typology, but its underlying theory may help to understand Martha's case whereby the system's well-fitting initial responses and the resources that nurture these responses may become inaccessible, exhausted, unreplenishable or otherwise inadequate over time and therefore show an 'eventual breakdown'. The fourth trajectory is conceptualized as 'severe persisting distress'. Proscovia's trajectory is characterized by the absence or the

inadequacy of the system's responses over an extended period, owing to the massive depletion of resources with limited replenishability and the acceleration of loss cycles from which it is hard to recuperate. This typology forms a useful framework to interpret the identified trajectories and the specific case studies.

Besides, it is equally important to unpack the trajectories and to analyze how challenges and resources are dealt with in the course of the transition. For that reason, the second step of the analysis existed of detailed process-oriented, interpretative-phenomenological case studies, against the theoretical backdrop of the COR-theory (Hobfoll, 1989; Layne et al., 2009). The cases demonstrated the formidable impact of armed conflict in general and child soldiering in specific on individuals and their surroundings, resulting in considerable challenges and deleterious pressure on the resource reservoir (Boothby et al., 2006; Johnson & Howard, 2007; Masten, 2007). As was expected on the basis of COR-theory, the reported challenges show a marked degree of 'loss' for the former child soldiers, be it directly and objectively or rather indirectly and perceived. In some cases, traditional sources of support were even transformed to sources of distress, showing that challenges and resources sometimes constitute reverse sides of the same factor (Boothby et al., 2006; Finnström, 2008; Johnson & Howard, 2007; Masten, 2007). Moreover, the loss of resources in the environment tended to branch down to losses for the individuals in this study (Hobfoll et al., 2009). Especially situations of ongoing depletion of resources, loss of unreplenishable resources, and threat of the often scantly remaining resources were particularly challenging and potentially distressing because they risk or actually imply causal chain effects of loss, as was illustrated in the case studies (Hobfoll, 1989).

In order to offset such loss, former child soldiers in this study clearly strived to protect and gain resources that were valued in their own right or were instrumental for the acquisition of other valued resources (Hobfoll, 2002). Notably, such initiatives appeared to be most successful when scaffolded by the environment. The cases indicated that the environment may either exert inhibitory factors that dissuade individual resources and thereby diminishes its beneficial effects, or facilitative factors that support individual resources and thereby increase its beneficial effects (Layne et al., 2009; Rutter, 1999). Individual initiatives that were supported by the environment appeared to enable gain of happiness and more resources in the course of the transition. This might help to understand why certain resources are treasured, pursued and protected as well as why their gain may result in causal chain effects of resource gain. Alternatively, it seemed to be equally important that environmental commodities are acknowledged and transformed to

opportunities by individuals (Pick & Sirkin, 2010), as occurred in the cases where environmental resources and support led to a growth mindset and vitalized individual strengths. All this points to the importance of a 'goodness of fit' of individual and environmental promotive factors and processes (Layne et al., 2009). This implies that both the objective availability of and the perceived access to the resources are essential to have and create opportunities for counterbalancing the challenges and engendering resource gains (Hobfoll et al., 2009; Pick & Sirkin, 2010). In this study, it was illustrated how in such cases participants and their environments managed to halt the depletion of resources, utilize available resources they were endowed with or could access, and value the remaining resources in order to offset resources loss sequelae. Although much of the encountered loss represented lasting changes in the environment or person, this loss could partially or fully be recuperated by the investment and gain of resources (Rutter, 1994).

All this confirms the importance of a comprehensive approach of the interconnected challenging and resourceful factors and of the intersecting internal and communal responses to challenges, rather than addressing them in isolation since this risks decontextualizing their value and disregarding their dynamic interaction (Diewald & Mayer, 2008; Hobfoll et al., 2009; Layne et al., 2009). Since warfare showed to involve a massive los of resources on a systemic level, intervention strategies in the wake of such mass casualties should primarily be oriented to the restoration and/or maintenance of the communal resource reservoir and the supportive capacities of the social ecology (Diewald & Mayer, 2008; Hobfoll et al., 2009; Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2007; Wessells, 2012). A resourceful environment that actively utilizes its resources in function of the communal and individual well-being is generally regarded as resilient and has the propensity to also nurture resilience in individuals (Boothby et al., 2006; Hobfoll, 1998; Psychosocial Working Group, 2002; Wessells, 2009). Additionally, this study has illustrated and thereby substantiated resource-based theories that emphasize the salience of resource loss and the risk of developing loss cycles when resources are depleted and thus no longer available to counterbalance the loss, which renders the prevention of resource loss (cycles) a high priority (Hobfoll, 1989; Layne, et al., 2009). Since there appear to be considerable differences in the access that individuals have to resources and the extent to which they are supported by their environments, an important subsidiary focus of intervention strategies should therefore be the targeted prevention of loss sequelae in cooperation with those individuals and their environments who lack or do not have access to strong resource reservoirs (Hobfoll et al., 2009). In so doing, it is

important to address the remaining resources that are on hand and to consider which of these resources need to be bolstered and which fitting key resources might be added to offset resource loss and foster resilience (Layne et al., 2007).

The limits of retrospective self-report data are well documented and mainly relate to potential biases in memory and information-processing capacities (Metts, Sprechar, & Cupach, 1991; Nisbett & Ross, 1980). Retrospective self-report data are therefore not amendable to test for accuracy, but they provide a valuable insight that in most cases cannot be generated by other methods (Aber & Jones, 1995; Metts et al., 1991). In this regard, the method has some distinctive advantages for studying private, sequencing and interrelating experiences (Metts et al., 1991). Furthermore, the subjective perspective of children and young people as an indicator in monitoring their well-being is gradually more valued (Aber & Jones, 1995; Metts et al., 1991). However, in order to make a sound estimations of children's well-being, multiple data-sources that elicit multiple perspectives are desired – of which the child's subjective perspective is a necessary component (Aber & Jones, 1995; Ben-Arieh, 2010). Furthermore, it should be noted that this study aimed to study the complexity of former child soldiers' trajectories, rather than generating generalizable knowledge and explain pre-defined hypotheses, which lies beyond the scope of qualitative research (Marshall, 1996). For this reason, the value of case studies is often doubted, yet lies in the contribution that it can make by connecting the insightful ideographic findings to the extant literature and thereby shed light to established nomothetic research (Smith et al., 2009).

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8

Informal and formal supports for former child soldiers in northern Uganda*

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"It is important to take a culturally grounded approach that starts with asking the children and their families and communities how they understand the children's situation, how they think of "reintegration," and what supports are available in the local culture and community that one can build on in supporting formerly recruited children."

Michael Wessells[*]

[*] Wessells, M. (2009). Supporting the mental health and psychosocial well-being of former child soldiers. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 48*(6), 587-590.

Abstract

This study aimed to evaluate the potential contribution of informal community initiatives and formal interventions in support of former child soldiers' resilience in the wake of armed conflict.

Using a cross-sectional survey design, a stratified random sample of 330 formerly recruited and 677 non-recruited young people was consulted about their perspective on desirable support for former child soldiers provided by close support figures, communities, humanitarian organizations and governments. Data analysis occurred by conducting qualitative thematic analysis and statistical chi square analysis to explore clusters, similarities and variations in reported support across the different 'agents', hereby comparing the perspectives of formerly recruited and non-recruited participants.

The results indicated that formerly recruited and non-recruited participants had comparable perspectives that call for the contribution of various informal and formal support systems to former child soldiers' human capacities and the communal socio-cultural fabric of war-affected societies.

This highlights the importance of community-based, collective and comprehensive support of formerly recruited young people and their surroundings in the aftermath of armed conflict.

8.1 Introduction

Contemporary warfare increasingly inflicts military strategies on civilians and sometimes particularly victimizes children (Barenbaum, Ruchkin, & Schwab-Stone, 2004). Among the more notorious and devastating war strategies is the recruitment of children by armed groups and forces. It is estimated that currently about a quarter of a million children are conscripted and militarily engaged in armed conflicts worldwide (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2008). Such child soldiering experiences typically involve persistent and intense exposure to war-related adversity, which constitutes a severe threat to the mental health of these children (Annan, Blattman, & Horton, 2006; Vindevogel, Coppens, Derluyn, De Schryver, Loots, & Broekaert, 2011). As a consequence, substantial psychological distress has consistently been assessed in former child soldiers (Blattman & Annan, 2008; Derluyn, Broekaert, Schuyten, & De Temmerman, 2004; Moscardino, Scrimin, Cadei, & Altoè, 2012; Okello, Onen, & Mussisi, 2007). Additionally, child soldiering also inflicts harm on the physical, social, educational and economic aspects of their lives and therefore creates multiple challenges (Betancourt, Brennan, Rubin-Smith, Fitzmaurice, & Gilman, 2010; Fernando, Miller, & Berger, 2010; Miller & Rasmussen, 2010). This potentially degrades former child soldiers' capacities upon return from the armed group or armed force and may lead to considerable loss of 'human capital', which refers to the resources endowed to individuals (Psychosocial Working Group, 2002).

However, the impact of child soldiering reaches far beyond the individual level. Targeting civilians as a war-strategy profoundly disrupts familial networks, social cohesion, civic services, and therefore destabilizes the entire social ecology of affected communities. The 'social ecology' refers to the social context in which individuals develop and that offers the social capital that they can use in responding to encountered challenges (Psychosocial Working Group, 2002). War strategies targeting civilians also erode traditional practices, mores and values and defy human rights in the affected community, thereby rupturing the 'cultural capital', that is the resources emanating from cultural and moral frameworks (Goodhand & Hulme, 1999; Keen, 2008; Psychosocial Working Group, 2002; Summerfield, 1999; Wisner & Adams, 2002). These multiple and intersecting ways in which child soldiering impinges on the psychosocial well-being of formerly recruited young people bring along implications for their transition from military to civilian life and for desirable support in the aftermath of the child

soldiering episode (Ager, Boothby, & Bremer, 2009; Boothby, Strang, & Wessells, 2006; Miller & Rasco, 2004; Wessells, 2006).

These implications have been incorporated into the Psychosocial Working Group (PWG)'s conceptual framework for psychosocial intervention in complex emergencies (Psychosocial Working Group, 2002). This framework forms an integration of resource-based approaches (e.g., conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1988, 1989)) and social ecological approaches to child development (e.g., ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)). The PWG theoretical framework delineates how people and communities at large deal with potential or actual loss of human, social and cultural capital in complex emergencies. When facing loss of such resources, people strive to maximize gain and to minimize loss in order to obtain and preserve resources that help in dealing with chronic and acute challenges (Hobfoll, 1988, 1989). As such, formerly recruited young people may seek to reactively repair the damage caused by child soldiering and to proactively protect their resources against the possible cascading demands that are associated with its aftermath. Through the use of such resources, many former child soldiers are able to maintain or regain well-being despite the unpromising circumstances, in a process which is termed 'resilience' (Rutter, 2006). Hereto, they actively engage to gain support for the extant resources and create new, supplementary resources (Hobfoll, 2001).

Additionally, when confronted with an adversity such as armed conflict, affected communities tend to strengthen their informal support systems and to actively engage in self-help processes to address the challenges in their situation (Hobfoll, 2011; Psychosocial Working Group, 2002). In this process, a myriad of resources is employed and socially exchanged to counter the inflicted harm and to proactively bolster one another's well-being (Hobfoll, 1988, 1989). Thus, agents in the environment are mediating the individual's access to supplementary resources in the collective resource pool. This points to the important intersections between individual and collective processes in response to the potential or actual demands associated with child soldiering and war at large. These indigenous sources and processes of support that communities use to enable well-being of their members is referred to as 'community resilience' (de Bruijne, Boin, Van Eeten, 2010; Psychosocial Working Group, 2002; Wessells, 2012). It is expected that by virtue of community resilience and the presence of these indigenous resources, the majority of former child soldiers is able to maintain or regain well-being (Wessells, 2012).

All this raises questions concerning the role that formal support systems, such as governmental agencies and non-governmental organizations, must

fulfill and the necessity and complementarity of their services in conjunction with those already provided by informal support systems. The initiation of formal support in (post-)conflict settings often follows the assumption that the informal support systems have insufficient resources or engage insufficiently in resource exchange processes to deal with the formidable harm inflicted on them (Boothby et al., 2006; Psychosocial Working Group, 2002). By doing so, programmatic responses risk disregarding the remarkable resourcefulness and resilience of war-affected individuals and their communities (Boothby et al., 2006; Psychosocial Working Group, 2002). While there is a consensus that the availability of indigenous resources and supportive responses is far from antithetical to the need for professional interventions (Wessells, 2012), different perspectives exist on the desirable focus areas, methods of operation and position to take when intervening in war-affected areas.

This study aims at addressing this issue through consulting former child soldiers' perspective on what different agents could ideally do to support them in the aftermath of their child soldiering experience. It is expected that what is proposed as desirable support covers a broad range of domains and is accounted for by different 'agents' that are either informally or formally involved. Since resilience is largely dependent on the response of the environment and the extent to which agents in this environment invest and exchange resources (Hobfoll, 1998; Psychosocial Working Group, 2002), it is also important to know whether the environment acknowledges and endorses the agents' supportive role towards former child soldiers. As an initial attempt to explore the views of close support figures, this study examined the perspectives of former child soldiers' age mates with regard to what different agents should do to support formerly recruited young people. Since former child soldiers frequently were found to be stigmatized (Blattman & Annan, 2008; Betancourt, Agnew-Blais, Gilman, Williams, & Ellis, 2010; Vindevogel, De Schryver, Broekaert, & Derluyn, in press; Wessells, 2009), the hypothesis seemed plausible that their age mates tended to think that formerly recruited youths themselves are to blame for their situation, which therefore they should resolve on their own with little support from environmental agents.

8.2 Method

This study is part of a larger mixed-method research project conducted between October and December 2010 in the Lira district of northern Uganda. This area is currently in transition after two decades of a complex armed conflict in which the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) forcibly recruited

thousands of minors as child soldiers (Blattman & Annan, 2008). The aim of the research was to assess challenges and resources in the transition of formerly recruited young people, whereby this study specifically aimed to enhance the understanding of how different agents can contribute to this transition and eventually to well-being in the wake of child soldiering. Hereto, the study took a contextually grounded, participatory approach that was approved by the Ethical Committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of Ghent University.

8.2.1 Participants

To create a stratified random sample, the District Education Office's overview of schools in Lira district was used to select six secondary schools and for each school two adjacent villages in urban, peri-urban and rural areas. The age range of 12-25 years was determined to include youth that were at the time of the LRA insurgency most likely to be among the young people that the LRA targeted for recruitment. In the villages, the out-of-school youth in this age bracket was invited to participate. In the schools, the students of classes Senior 2 and 3 of the O-level were considered to be the best age-match, given that in the lower level a diversity of ages was represented and that the higher level showed a considerable frequency of drop-outs. This resulted in a sample of 1,008 Ugandan youths, of whom about a third had formerly been recruited by the LRA (one participant did not disclose his status).

The subsample of 330 formerly recruited participants comprised 201 (61%) males and 129 (39%) females, with an average age of 17.04 (*SD*=2.31, *range*=12-25) years. The median duration of their recruitment in the LRA was 348.50 (*M*=564.79, *SD*=752.74, *range*=1-6570) days. The greater part of them had escaped (*n*=242, 75%) on average 5.57 (*SD*=1.88, *range*=1-10) years ago. A majority of 225 (68%) participants originated from Lira district, others resided here for familial, economic or educational reasons. Most of them lived in a rural (*n*=155, 47%) or peri-urban (*n*=118, 36%) village, while the minority lived in town (*n*=37, 11%) or in a camp (*n*=18, 6%). Most participants were attending school (*n*=235, 71%). Of the out-of-school participants, the greater part engaged in farming activities (*n*=46, 48%) or declared to have no occupation (*n*=33, 35%).

The subsample of 677 non-recruited participants consisted of 346 (51%) males and 331 (49%) females, with the average age of 16.54 (*SD*=1.91, *range*=12-24) years. They either lived in the same village or attended the same class as the formerly recruited participants in this study.

8.2.2 Procedure

In cooperation with community leaders and school principals, a plenary meeting was organized in each village and school to disperse information necessary to make an informed decision on participating in this study. This information mainly included the purpose and procedure of the study, the possibilities and consequences of refusal or withdrawal from the study, and the availability of psychosocial support during or subsequently to the study. The written informed assent or consent was obtained from all participants. Collecting consent of legal guardians of minors was hindered by them living separately and often far apart. The participants did not receive any compensation for their participation in this study.

A cross-sectional survey questionnaire with mainly open-ended questions was administered. This questionnaire firstly consisted of socio-demographics of the participants, including age, gender, district and location of residence, occupation, religion, household composition, and former child soldiering experiences. Secondly, it contained open-ended questions on what different agents could do to support formerly recruited young people in their transition from military to civilian life. The questions were carefully designed by the bicultural research team to insure inclusion of the most relevant informal and formal agents (i.e. themselves, family, friends, community, organizations, government) and ease of understanding (e.g., What can they themselves do? What can their family do?). 'Family' referred to the nuclear and extended family members; 'friends' consisted of intimate friends, age mates and classmates; 'community' referred to the people who are linked by social ties and the geographical location, including neighbors, social groups and local cultural, religious and political leaders; 'organizations' included charitable, non-governmental and United Nations agencies; and 'government' referred to national and international government bodies. Rules were made concerning how to communicate and translate this additional information, which was orally disseminated to the participants.

The in-school participants and out-of-school participants with sufficient literacy skills individually administered a written version of the questionnaire in English (the official language of education), while the researcher and a trained bilingual research assistant remained available. For out-of-school participants with limited literacy skills, the questionnaire was in interview format administered orally by the researcher and simultaneously translated on-site into Lango (the native language of the region) by trained bilingual research assistants. These interviews took place individually in a confidential setting.

8.2.3 Analysis

The answers were analyzed and divided into meaning units, whereby those that were conceptually identical were merged and each unique meaning unit received a different numerical code. This procedure resulted in composite lists of the reported unique items per agent. The analysis of these items was based on the Psychosocial Working Group (PWG)'s conceptual framework for psychosocial intervention in complex emergencies, which incorporates an integration of the original conceptual framework discerning the main domains of resources (i.e., human capacities, social ecology, culture and values) (Psychosocial Working Group, 2002) and empirical elaboration of this framework defining key sub-domains of resources in northern Uganda (Vindevogel, Wessells, De Schryver, Broekaert, & Derluyn, 2012). Using the software application for qualitative data-analysis Nvivo, the items were thematically analyzed and categorized according to the conceptual framework. Subsequently, cluster analysis by coding similarity was performed to visualize patterns in coded items across the agents, in order to determine the similarity of item allocation over the different agents. Jaccard similarity coefficient was calculated. Further statistical analyses were conducted in SPSS 20. Descriptive statistics were used to represent the socio-demographic characteristics of the sample and the allocation of the categorized items over the resource (sub-)domains for each agent. Chi square analysis of the data allowed to explore similarities and variations in reported resources across the different domains and agents, comparing between formerly recruited and non-recruited participants. The significance level was set at 0.01, to reduce the chance of Type I-error but still allow exploratory testing.

8.3 Results

Figure 1: Agents clustered by coding similarity

The cluster dendogram (fig. 1) shows a split between the items of formerly recruited individuals and the items of other agents. Among the other agents, the items of friends and family were closest related and so were those of the

government and community (J=1.00). The items allocated to organizations were situated in between the items of family and friends on the one hand and the items of community and government on the other hand. However, the similarity metric shows that there was high similarity between the sample sets of all agents (*range*=0.80-1.00).

Table 1 and Figure 2 represent the allocation of support items per agent and per resource domain. Most items reported by formerly recruited participants pertained to support for 'human capacities', in which 'knowledge and skills', 'livelihood' and 'mental health' resources were most prevailing. The reported number of items pertaining to 'human capacities' was quite high for all agents, but the highest number was reported for family and friends. Another large number of items referred to support for the 'social ecology', including 'social support', 'social services and infrastructure', and 'social connectedness' as the most common sub-domains. Support to the 'social ecology' was mostly assigned to the government, organizations and the community and the least to formerly recruited young people. The third resource domain consisted of 'culture and values', in which respectively 'human rights', 'religious values' and 'cultural practices' were to be supported mainly by formerly recruited youths, their families and friends. The least frequently occurring items were reported for 'political' and 'economic' resources in the 'periphery', which were mainly assigned to governments and organizations.

This table and figure also show that formerly recruited adolescents were primarily recommended to strengthen their own 'human capacity', by developing their 'knowledge and skills', adhering to 'religious beliefs', applying 'mental health' strategies, and strengthening their 'livelihood'. To a lesser extent, they were also expected to contribute to the 'culture and values' and the 'social ecology' of their environment. The table and figure further seem to indicate that support expected from families, friends and communities diminished steadily from resources in 'human capacities' to the 'periphery'. Families' largest contribution lies in the support of 'human capacities' – specifically their children's 'knowledge and skills', 'livelihood' and 'physical health' – and in the provision and promotion of 'social support'. Friends were mainly expected to contribute to 'human capacities' by supporting the 'knowledge and skills' and 'mental health' of their friends, and also to the 'social ecology' by facilitating their 'social connectedness' and delivering 'social support'. The community's assignments were equally divided over the three core domains, and were more specifically oriented to support the 'knowledge and skills' and 'livelihood' of formerly recruited young people, as well as 'social support' and 'human rights' issues in the community. The support functions assigned to organizations and the

government mainly pertained to the 'human capacities' and 'social ecology' domains, but then diminished markedly for 'culture and values' and the 'periphery'. Organizations were reported to make the largest contributions to 'human capacities' by supporting the 'livelihood', 'mental health' and 'knowledge and skills' of formerly recruited young people, and also to the 'social ecology' by initiating 'social services and infrastructure' and promoting 'social support'. The government's responsibilities were mostly defined in relation to the 'social ecology', including the initiation of 'social services and infrastructure' as well as 'law and order', and in relation to the 'human capacities', mainly the 'knowledge and skills' and 'livelihood' of formerly recruited youth. Table 2 gives an illustration of the most frequently reported items for all agents in each resource domain.

Table 1 and Figure 2 further depict the comparison between formerly recruited and non-recruited youth, showing seemingly similar patterns for both comparison groups. A few significant differences appeared. Firstly, families' support to 'mental health' resources was esteemed higher by non-recruited participants. Secondly, non-recruited participants reported less support from friends for 'human rights' resources. Thirdly, this group reported a lower contribution of organizations to 'human capacities' in general and to 'social support' resources. Fourthly, communities were less supposed to support 'culture and values', and particularly 'cultural practices'. Lastly, they expected governments to deliver more support to formerly recruited youth's 'livelihood', but less support to 'social services and infrastructure' and to 'human rights' issues.

Table 1: Proportion (n(%)) of formerly recruited (R, n=330) and non-recruited (N, n=677) youth's answers per resource domain and agent

	Themselves			Family			Friends			Organizations			Community			Government		
	R	**N**	χ^2	**R**	**N**	χ^2	**R**	**N**	χ^2	**R**	**N**	χ^2	**R**	**N**	χ^2	**R**	**N**	χ^2
Human capacities	**243 (74)**	**539 (80)**	**4.57**	**288 (87)**	**571 (84)**	**1.52**	**277 (84)**	**558 (87)**	**0.36**	**237 (72)**	**420 (62)**	**9.36 ****	**228 (69)**	**486 (72)**	**0.78**	**184 (56)**	**434 (64)**	**6.52**
Mental health	97 (29)	249 (37)	5.37	52 (16)	163 (24)	9.14 **	105 (32)	241 (36)	1.41	104 (32)	205 (30)	0.16	44 (13)	78 (12)	0.68	21 (6)	74 (11)	5.42
Physical health	7 (2)	15 (2)	0.01	96 (29)	173 (26)	1.42	22 (7)	58 (9)	1.10	21 (6)	30 (4)	1.72	57 (19)	147 (22)	2.71	35 (11)	74 (11)	0.02
Knowledge & skills	133 (40)	284 (42)	0.25	198 (60)	398 (59)	0.14	168 (51)	319 (47)	1.28	86 (26)	138 (20)	4.13	130 (39)	250 (37)	0.57	97 (29)	188 (28)	0.29
Livelihoods	69 (21)	111 (17)	3.08	143 (43)	271 (40)	1.00	76 (23)	157 (23)	0.00	131 (40)	225 (33)	4.05	110 (33)	263 (39)	2.89	81 (25)	223 (33)	7.42 **
Personal values	32 (10)	68 (10)	0.30	30 (9)	34 (5)	6.17	23 (7)	44 (7)	0.08	17 (5)	32 (5)	0.09	8 (2)	22 (3)	0.52	0 (0)	2 (0)	0.98
Social ecology	**116 (35)**	**249 (37)**	**0.26**	**154 (47)**	**344 (51)**	**1.53**	**179 (54)**	**413 (61)**	**4.19**	**227 (69)**	**424 (63)**	**3.68**	**202 (61)**	**402 (59)**	**0.31**	**252 (76)**	**483 (71)**	**2.84**
Social connectedness	54 (16)	151 (22)	4.83	40 (12)	97 (14)	0.92	109 (33)	262 (39)	3.07	28 (8)	57 (8)	0.00	53 (16)	144 (21)	3.83	35 (11)	54 (8)	1.90
Social support	56 (17)	79 (12)	5.37	115 (35)	215 (32)	0.96	91 (28)	218 (32)	2.23	74 (22)	89 (13)	14.08 ***	111 (34)	175 (26)	6.62	44 (13)	84 (12)	0.17
Social service & infrastructure	25 (8)	41 (6)	0.84	15 (5)	61 (9)	6.34	10 (3)	7 (1)	5.33	164 (50)	324 (48)	0.30	59 (18)	126 (19)	0.08	175 (53)	299 (44)	7.00 **
Safety	0 (0)	1 (0)	0.49	8 (2)	24 (4)	0.91	5 (2)	25 (4)	3.64	17 (5)	25 (4)	1.18	21 (6)	36 (5)	0.46	25 (8)	38 (6)	1.46
Law & order	7 (2)	13 (2)	0.05	1 (0)	1 (0)	0.27	0 (0)	5 (1)	2.45	7 (2)	26 (4)	2.07	7 (2)	16 (2)	0.06	88 (27)	177 (26)	0.03
Culture & values	**127 (38)**	**272 (40)**	**0.27**	**81 (25)**	**176 (26)**	**0.25**	**103 (31)**	**201 (30)**	**0.24**	**33 (10)**	**65 (10)**	**0.04**	**108 (33)**	**160 (24)**	**9.39 ****	**62 (19)**	**87 (13)**	**6.20**
Cultural practices	38 (12)	67 (10)	0.62	9 (3)	16 (2)	0.12	28 (8)	59 (9)	0.02	1 (0)	0 (0)	2.05	37 (11)	36 (5)	11.47 ***	24 (7)	34 (5)	2.07
Religious beliefs	99 (30)	226 (33)	1.16	21 (6)	64 (9)	2.74	35 (11)	91 (13)	1.63	4 (1)	3 (0)	1.90	12 (3)	23 (3)	0.04	3 (1)	12 (2)	1.13
Human rights	5 (2)	5 (1)	1.36	54 (16)	104 (15)	0.17	52 (16)	68 (10)	6.90 **	29 (9)	63 (9)	0.07	69 (21)	111 (16)	3.08	42 (13)	42 (6)	12.35 ***

Periphery	**1 (0)**	**0 (0)**	**2.05**	**0 (0)**	**0 (0)**	**-**	**0 (0)**	**0 (0)**	**-**	**23 (7)**	**31 (5)**	**2.50**	**2 (1)**	**2 (0)**	**0.54**	**35 (11)**	**69 (10)**	**0.00**
Economic climate	1 (0)	0 (0)	2.05	0 (0)	0 (0)	-	0 (0)	0 (0)	-	0 (0)	0 (0)	-	2 (1)	1 (0)	1.57	12 (4)	12 (2)	3.31
Political climate	0 (0)	0 (0)	-	0 (0)	0 (0)	-	0 (0)	0 (0)	-	23 (7)	31 (5)	2.50	0 (0)	1 (0)	0.49	23 (7)	59 (9)	0.90
Nothing	**2 (1)**	**14 (2)**	**0.13**	**0 (0)**	**2 (0)**	**0.98**	**0 (0)**	**2 (0)**	**0.98**	**1 (0)**	**0 (0)**	**2.05**	**1 (0)**	**0 (0)**	**2.05**	**1 (0)**	**0 (0)**	**2.05**

***N* (%), R=Recruited participants ; N=Non-recruited participants; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$.**

Figure 2: Proportion of formerly recruited (left) and non-recruited (right) youth's answers per resource domain and agent

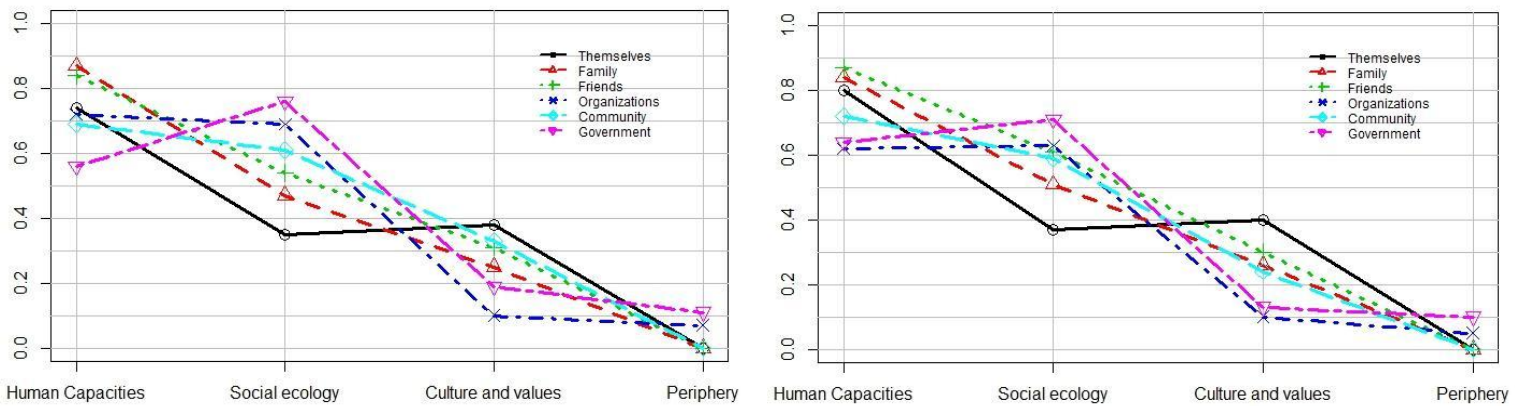

Table 2: Formerly recruited youth's most frequently reported items for each agent and resource domain (n,%)

	Human Capital	**Social ecology**	**Culture and values**	**Periphery**
Themselves	to do agricultural activities (KS) (49, 15) to start or continue studying (KS) (42, 13) to forget about the past (MH) (32, 10)	to take their problem to organizations and ask for support (SSI) (18, 5) to organize themselves in a self-help group (SS) (13, 4) to join a youth club or organization (SC) (11, 3)	to pray to God (RB) (57, 17) to always put God first (RB) (25, 8) to behave respectful to others (CP) (15, 5)	to work hard for the development of the country (EC) (1, 0)
Family	to support them in education and training (KS) (149, 45) to provide them basic requirements (L) (76, 23) to feed them properly with balanced diet (PH) (68, 21)	to give them parental care (SS) (50, 15) to show love to them (SS) (38, 12) to stay close to them (SC) (15, 5)	to avoid segregating them from the other children in the family (HR) (22, 7) to avoid mistreating them (HR) (11, 3) to avoid isolating them from others (HR) (7, 2)	/
Friends	to give them advice (KS) (99, 30) to counsel them (MH) (30, 9) to share their properties with them (L) (29, 9)	to stay close to them (SC) (54, 16) to show love to them (SS) (38, 12) to play games with them (SS) (32, 10)	to avoid insulting them (HR) (25, 8) to do storytelling with them (CP) (17, 5) to treat them equally to other children (HR) (11, 3)	/
Organizations	to support them in education and training (KS) (203, 62) to provide them basic requirements (L) (60, 18) to give them scholastic materials (L) (59, 18)	to organize free medical care (SSI) (30, 9) to organize care for the most vulnerable and needy (SSI) (16, 5) to build schools (SSI) (12, 4)	to advocate for these children's rights (HR) (5, 2) to talk to them in a good, friendly way (HR) (1, 0) to promote the right for good medical care (HR) (1, 0)	to settle peace in the area (PC) (3, 1) to encourage and facilitate peace talks with the rebels (PC) (2, 0.61) to monitor country-level political affairs (PC) (1, 0)
Community	to support them in education and training (KS) (74, 22) to make sure they are fed properly (PH) (52, 16) to give them clothes and shoes (L) (34, 10)	to care for them as their children (SS) (24, 7) to show love to them (SS) (17, 5) to welcome them back when they return (SC) (16, 5)	to treat them equally to other members of the community (HR) (29, 9) to introduce them to community norms (CP) (15, 5) to avoid insulting them (HR) (12, 4)	to work hard for the development of the country (EC) (2, 1)
Government	to support them in education and training (KS) (106, 32) to provide them basic requirements (L) (42, 13) to give them food and water (PH) (37, 11)	to organize affordable or free education (SSI) (48, 15) to build schools (SSI) (29, 9) to provide free medical care (SSI) (26, 8)	to make sure their rights are not abused (HR) (6, 2) to support them equally to other citizen (HR) (5, 2) to control if they are taken back to school (HR) (4, 1)	to build peace and stability in the country (PC) (27, 8) to create job opportunities (EC) (16, 5) to organize peace talks with the rebels (PC) (9, 3)

MH: mental health; PH: physical health; KS: knowledge and skills; L: livelihoods; SC: social connectedness; SS: social support; SSI: social service and infrastructure; CP: cultural practices; RB: religious beliefs; HR: human rights; EC: economic climate

8.4 Discussion

This study examined formerly recruited young people's perspectives on the potential contributions that diverse informal and formal support systems can make to their well-being in the wake of child soldiering. The results revealed that formerly recruited young people call for support on a variety of resource domains to which both informal and formal agents can make significant contributions. Required supports seemingly diminished from resources endowed to individuals to resources in the periphery. A plausible explanation is that those challenges and resources that are most directly related to one's well-being are often considered the most pertinent and therefore are more reported (Hobfoll, 1988, 1989). Hence, the largest part of the recommendations refer to support for human capacities and more particularly for the former child soldiers' knowledge and skills, livelihood and mental health. When interpreting these most recommended types of support against the backdrop of the most pertinent challenges identified in our previous study (Vindevogel, De Schryver et al., in press), interesting parallels appear between the urge for support in 'knowledge and skills' and 'livelihood' resources to meet 'training and skills-related' and 'economic' challenges, and between support for 'mental health' resources to meet 'emotional' challenges. In the wake of armed conflict, formerly recruited young people may particularly face challenges related to the mental health consequences of their augmented exposure to war-related adversity and to the educational and economic impact of child soldiering (Blattman & Annan, 2008, 2010; Moscardino et al., 2012). This might explain their high demand for support in these domains and shows that there is a considerable need for specific individualized support to strengthen young people whose human capital has been threatened or affected and who consequently may experience substantial distress in the aftermath of child soldiering (Barenbaum et al., 2004). According to the participants of this study, such support can largely be provided by support figures among their kith and kin, but to a considerable extent also by the community-based, humanitarian, and governmental support structures.

Besides, there is a great deal of recommendations that represent non-specific and communal support, given that these pertain to the social and cultural fabric. The need for support of the social ecology might be explained by the fact that the impact of war is in part influenced by the extent to which social networks, public facilities, and customary practices are affected and hence limited in their supportive capacities (Barenbaum et al., 2004; Wessells, 2006). To offset the loss of social capital, social connectedness

may reduce alienation and install a sense of belonging in the aftermath of child soldiering (Annan, Brier, & Aryemo, 2009; Cortes & Buchanan, 2007). Further, social support has consistently been associated with better psychosocial well-being and stronger resilience of formerly recruited youth, for it strengthens people's capacities to deal with challenges (Boothby, 2006; Stichick, 2001). Social services and infrastructure related to education, healthcare, and development among others are indispensable for human welfare. It should be noted that the limited reports with regard to safety and law and order may have been biased by the current, relatively stable and peaceful post-conflict status of northern Uganda, whereas this in the midst of conflicts is rather a primary concern and important duty to protect young people's well-being (Yule, 2002). All this shows that support in the aftermath of war should work on the reconstruction of the social fabric and on the development of social capacities to support members who are in need of particular support (Barenbaum et al., 2004; Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2007). According to the participants, such support can in the first place be provided by formal support structures such as governments and organizations, but also considerably by communities, friends and families who are at the heart of the social environment.

Support for culture and values was less reported, though still requires considerable attention from informal and formal agents. Support in this domain should mainly be oriented to human rights issues and cultural practices. During and following warfare, grave abuses may occur that defy basic human rights, and formerly recruited young people may in particular experience subjugation and discrimination, which possibly explains their need for support in this area (Psychosocial Working Group, 2002). War also often erodes the culture that unites people and constructs a shared identity, and that forms the framework for cultural-specific manifestations of challenges and responses to it (Barenbaum et al., 2004; Wessells, 2006). Support for cultural practices and values therefore is important to reinstall communal life and stimulate cooperative, indigenous responses to encountered challenges. Informal support systems fulfill an important role in reconnecting formerly recruited youth to contextually-appropriate ways of meaning-making and living, grounded in cultural, ideological and spiritual frameworks (Wessells, 2006). Formal support systems should in their efforts build upon these informal and culturally grounded approaches (Barenbaum et al., 2004; Boothby et al., 2006; Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2007; Wessells, 2006). Influences of the broader context are still relevant to the formerly recruited youth, albeit apparently to a lesser extent. These peripheral factors are mainly considered to be an issue of the government that bears a duty with regard to the economic and political

climate of the country. The latter should be supported by organizations (Machel, 2001). The emphasis on the three core domains of resources confirms the importance of support that covers the broad range of human, social and cultural capital. It also indicates that former child soldiers' trajectories to resilience are ideally scaffolded by human, social, and cultural resources (Boothby et al., 2006; Psychosocial Working Group, 2002; Wessells, 2006).

Besides, the study explored similarities and differences between the perception of formerly recruited and non-recruited participants concerning the contribution that various informal and formal agents can make to these resource domains. The aim of this comparison was to obtain a preliminary insight into whether former child soldiers' perspectives are endorsed by agents in their environment. The results showed some significant differences that suggest that the participants who were recruited situate more supports outside themselves and their families than is acknowledged or supported by their non-recruited age mates. Nonetheless, the overall distribution patterns of resources showed that formerly recruited and non-recruited young people generally shared the same perspective on support for former child soldiers. This reveals that the age mates acknowledge the important supportive role to be played by environmental agents, and that they are willing to invest and exchange their own and communal resources in support of formerly recruited young people. However, formerly recruited young people themselves are also expected to not only invest in their own capacities, but to make a contribution to their social ecology and to the culture and values of their community. Such investment in the socio-cultural fabric may be warranted when they aim to obtain access to the rich reservoir of communal resources in their environment, that can help to deal with loss brought forth by child soldiering and to offset ensuing challenges that may occur in the aftermath (Hobfoll, 2001). Various support figures and systems can act as mediator to obtain these communal resources (Hobfoll, 1989). The active role assigned to the various agents shows that successful transition of former child soldiers requires a network of close, informal support systems and professional support structures (Barenbaum et al., 2004; Machel, 2001). Regarding the informal support initiatives in the community, the diversity of supports and the considerable contribution to various domains points to 'community resilience'. The role fulfilled by formal support systems in addition to the organic resilience of communities indicates that wider ecological levels are also rich reservoirs of resources that can be invested in service of war-affected individuals and communities. Consequently, the term 'ecological resilience' is often preferred (Tol, Jordans, Reis, & De Jong, 2009).

The high similarity of items across informal and formal agents indicates that all agents are supposed to work toward similar goals and largely must support the same resource domains. This recommends collaborative initiatives, whereby local informal support systems within the community report to formal agents about the resources at their disposal and about their ongoing initiatives to deliver the required support. Formal support systems may in turn strengthen the local capacities by revitalizing, augmenting or formalizing the support offered by communities (Annan et al., 2009; Boothby et al., 2006; Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2007; Wessells, 2006). Such community-based initiatives in support of former child soldiers may create an environment that fosters resource engagement and exchange, and eventually resilience of former child soldiers (Hobfoll, 2011). With regard to the role to fulfill by formal support systems, this implies that the locus of support should be communal rather than solely individual, and that their interventions should target affected communities (Psychosocial Working Group, 2002). The orientation of support to individual human resources and collective social-cultural resources indicates that specific interventions for formerly recruited youth should not be singled out, yet be integrated into wider support systems. Additionally, former child soldiers' request for support on various resource domains indicates that they do not necessarily need a singular nor an utmost specialized kind of support. This implies that supports for former child soldiers should be part of a comprehensive, multi-level initiative that operates on the individual, social and cultural dimensions of life (Barenbaum et al., 2004; Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2007; Nesbit, 2003; Triplehorn & Chen, 2006).

These findings should be interpreted in the light of the methodological limitations of this study. To begin with, when asked to share perspectives on desirable support, people are likely to favor direct needs satisfaction to compensate direct resource loss (Hobfoll, 1988, 1989). As a consequence, it is possible that certain types of support have been underestimated and therefore were not reported, yet they could make a valuable contribution in a rather indirect manner or in the longer term. Thus, the motivation for direct needs satisfaction might have biased the participants' responses. Besides, the hypothetical question on what might be done to support formerly recruited young people may inadvertently have raised the expectation of actually acquiring the requested support. This implies the possibility that the participants exaggerated their recommendations for informal and formal support systems, while neglecting their extant resources in hopes of emphasizing the much needed additional support (Alvaro, Lyons, Warner, Hobfoll, Martens, Labonté et al., 2010). Another constraint is related to the limited perspectives included in this study, given

that only the non-recruited age mates were heard as representatives of the different informal and formal agents. In order to evaluate whether former child soldiers' requests for support can rely on social backing and are feasible, a thorough examination of the perspectives and resources of all different agents should occur. This could facilitate a better estimation of the extent to which formerly recruited young people's needs can be satisfied or are frustrated by environmental support systems, which is an important determinant of well-being (Ryan, 1995).

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9

General discussion

Abstract

In this final chapter, the findings of the four studies are presented and integrated. The findings of each study are discussed in accordance with the central research questions. Subsequently, the contribution to the theoretical framework on former child soldiers' transition is delineated. This dissertation is then situated in relation to the orthopedagogical scientific discipline. Further, implications of the findings for psychosocial interventions are outlined, and concrete suggestions are proposed to develop more integrative and differentiated interventions. The overall strengths and limitations of this research are discussed and suggestions for future research are made, indicating the need for more longitudinal research that studies the role of challenges and resources, that includes various social ecological levels, and further strengthens the evidence base.

9.1 Introduction

The overall objective of this dissertation was to gain insight in what helps former child soldiers in dealing with their past experiences and current challenges in the course of their transition from military to civilian life. This aim arose from an understanding of the complexity of the situation former child soldiers find themselves in upon departure from the armed faction, as well as from a genuine belief in the strengths of people, even when challenged under the pressure of adversity. Hence, this study was framed against the backdrop of 'social ecological systems theory' (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which emphasizes that individual well-being is nested within and thus essentially interconnected with its larger context, and of 'resource-based theory' (Hobfoll, 2002), which highlights that individual well-being is considerably shaped by the dynamic interplay between the challenges one encounters and the resources one has at hand to address these challenges. As was outlined in the introduction of this dissertation, the combination of these theoretical frameworks fostered a systematic, integrative, strengths-based and culturally sensitive approach to the study of former child soldiers and their transition from military to civilian life, along potential pathways towards psychosocial resilience in spite of the often unpromising circumstances.

The research was carried out in northern Uganda, a region that is currently in transition after a decades-long insurgency that forced tens of thousands of young people into child soldiering. The complexity of their situation also required its deconstruction into different components of the transition process, which resulted in the subdivision of this dissertation into four different studies. The first study examined the experiences during child soldiering in the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). The second study tested whether these past child soldiering-related factors and/or post-child soldiering factors played a role in the longer term psychosocial well-being of former child soldiers. The third study assessed and compared the challenges and the resources of formerly recruited and non-recruited young people, and it also explored their perspectives on desirable supports for former child soldiers. The fourth study investigated what meaning former child soldiers make of the phenomena they perceive as resources as well as the meaning of resources in their transition trajectory after leaving the LRA.

This final chapter integrates the findings of these four studies and reconstructs a coherent whole, from which the overall research question can be addressed and meaningful action can grow. To begin with, the main findings of the different studies are discussed in the light of the leading

research questions. The dissertation hereby seeks to contribute to the scientific theoretical framework specific to former child soldiers' transition process and to their challenges and resources in the wake of child soldiering, as well as to the general scientific knowledge base on challenges, resources and resilience of populations in (post-)conflict settings. This dissertation is then situated in relation to the orthopedagogical scientific discipline. Further, implications of the findings for psychosocial interventions are outlined, and concrete suggestions are proposed to develop more integrative and differentiated interventions. Subsequently, the study limitations and the implications for intervention strategies are discussed, after which directions for future research are outlined. By doing so, this dissertation aspires to be meaningful for the development of the field as it continuously unfolds, and to raise opportunities to continue improving the research, policy and practice interventions aimed at the support of former child soldiers' transition and resilience in the wake of armed conflict.

9.2 Main conclusions

9.2.1 Setting the scene: child soldiering in northern Uganda

As encapsulated in the internationally adopted definition of 'child soldiers' (Unicef, 1997), the term covers young people with a wide array of varying experiences and roles within armed groups and armed forces. Given that the roles of children within an armed faction and the war-related experiences they have as child soldiers tend to be very much contextually defined (Wessells, 2006b) and that in the early stage of this research there was little documentation available on the scope, nature and intensity of the war-related experiences and roles of Ugandan former child soldiers, this research started out with an exploration of the profile of former child soldiers in northern Uganda.

The first study (*chapter 2*) was based on the rich archives of diverse former Interim Care Centres in northern Uganda, which had collected information on the socio-demographic background and the war-related experiences of the thousands of formerly recruited young people that had stayed there in transit from the armed group to the community. The analyses, focused on the prevalence of war-related experiences and on the identification of its associated factors, revealed the vastness of the abuse associated with child soldiering in northern Uganda. None of the former child soldiers had been safeguarded against the reign of terror exerted by the LRA. The factors that

were associated with increased exposure to war-related adversity included a longer duration of captivity, receiving a military training, residing in a Sudanese LRA base, being older and being a rebel's wife. These findings revealed the considerable variation in former child soldiers' experiences and roles, and broached the important conclusion that former child soldiers are far from a homogeneous group. The results also provided insight into the nature of the experiences and the roles that child soldiers endured while with the LRA. They lived in the most precarious circumstances and were recurrently exposed to the most horrifying war atrocities, of which they became victims, witnesses and (forced) perpetrators. The gruesome nature of these young people's experiences within the LRA was also revealed during the interviews that were conducted for the fourth study. While these interviews did not aim to collect data on the child soldiering experiences of the participants, the interviews were often used by the participants as a channel to narrate and thereby ventilate their experiences within the LRA. These interviews and the narrative accounts of formerly recruited young people thus provided additional context for the findings of the first study. The results of the first study further showed that young people fulfilled a multifaceted role within the LRA, whereby they were not only exploited to serve the commanders and fill the ranks of the LRA but were also actively used to inflict atrocities on opposing armed factions, trading centres, schools, and often on their own communities and families.

Beyond any doubt such experiences may perniciously inflict on the psychosocial well-being of former child soldiers, and threaten their social position and integration in the war-torn society (Pedersen & Sommerfelt, 2007; Wessells, 2006b; Williams, 2007). A review of the scientific literature indicated that most studies on the psychosocial well-being of former child soldiers had been executed shortly after their departure from the armed faction, while considerably less was known about the evolutions in the longer term. This motivated the study of the longer term psychosocial well-being of former child soldiers, in the light of the possible influences of their child soldiering experiences and of their post-child soldiering situation (*study 2, see 2.2*).

9.2.2 Beyond child soldiering: longer term psychosocial well-being and its associated factors

As indicated by the findings of the previous study (*study 1, see 2.1*), the child soldiering experiences and the roles fulfilled in the conflict generally cause concern for the psychological well-being and social integration of former

child soldiers in the wake of their departure from the armed faction (Pedersen & Sommerfelt, 2007). These concerns had in some cases evolved into grim portrayals of former child soldiers as traumatized pariahs and ticking time bombs as consequences of the traumatic events they were exposed to. Other cases had emphasized the resilience of former child soldiers and had portrayed them as strong survivors of the true horrors they experienced (Annan, Brier, & Aryemo, 2009). This motivated the second study (*chapter 3*), which was conducted in order to document the psychosocial well-being of northern Ugandan former child soldiers in the longer term since this perspective had hitherto been underrepresented in research.

This study resulted out of a unique opportunity to examine the follow-up records of an Interim Care Centre for former child soldiers in northern Uganda. The centre had monitored a group of formerly recruited young people who previously stayed at the centre and had on average more than two years ago been reinserted into the community. The analysis that looked into the prevalence of the repeatedly measured psychological symptoms revealed different developments over time, indicating that psychosocial well-being may evolve along various trajectories. While some symptoms showed decreased or sustained prevalence, other symptoms became more prevalent over time. Given these various longer term developments, the question arose as to which factors were associated with the longer term prevalence of psychological distress. A literature review pointed to an ongoing debate, based on fundamentally divergent assumptions with regard to the factors that mostly influence psychosocial well-being in situations of armed conflict, namely adversity-related factors versus post-adversity factors (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010). This study therefore took into account both child soldiering-related and post-child soldiering variables as potential associated factors of former child soldiers' psychosocial well-being in the longer term. The results of this study showed that post-child soldiering factors, such as the economic situation of the household, school attendance, professional support and especially social stigmatization, were more decisively associated with the differences in the longer term psychosocial well-being than were the child soldiering-related factors. This did not mean that child soldiering exerted no influence on former child soldiers' psychosocial well-being, but implied that over time the post-child soldiering factors may have become relatively more significant in the lives of former child soldiers. These findings of the second study pointed to the importance of post-child soldiering living conditions and experiences as possible sources of distress that may induce or exacerbate psychological strain in former child soldiers and therefore may impinge on their psychosocial well-

being in the longer term (Fernando, Miller, & Berger, 2010; Miller, Omidian, Rasmussen, Yaqubi & Daudzai, 2008). Such findings have fostered the conclusion that former child soldiers' transition is likely to be more dependent on the challenges they encounter and the opportunities they are provided in the aftermath of child soldiering than to be determined by their past child soldiering experiences (Boothby, Strang, & Wessells, 2006).

The demonstrated importance of such post-child soldiering factors and the observation that this second study possibly unveiled only some of these factors motivated the design of the subsequent study (*study 3, see 2.3*) that comprehensively explored the challenges that former child soldiers encounter in the context of northern Uganda.

9.2.3 Challenges

Driven by the important observation that upon leaving the LRA, former child soldiers do not only carry the burden of their past war-related experiences, but are also confronted with myriad challenges that emerge from their war-affected surroundings and that may significantly impinge on their psychosocial well-being (*study 2, see 2.2*) (Fernando et al., 2010; Miller et al., 2008), the third study was partially devoted to the comprehensive assessment of the challenges encountered by former child soldiers. Moreover, a literature review showed that it was often assumed that, compared with non-recruited young people, former child soldiers may experience different of more challenges due to their child soldiering past and their alleged dubious position in the society. There was, however, a lack of research that incorporated a comparison group and thus delivered evidence that supported or disproved this assumption (Kohrt, Jordans, Tol, Speckman, Maharjan, Worthman et al., 2008; Tol, Patel, Tomlinson, Baingana, Galappatti, Panter-Brick et al., 2011). For this reason, the third study compared the challenges that formerly recruited young people might experience and those encountered by their non-recruited peers in northern Uganda (*chapter 4*).

In order to acknowledge the complex and context-specific nature of challenges, the study adopted a mixed methods comparison design that consisted of a free listing task with northern Ugandan youths to elicit the salient challenges; a free sorting task with northern Ugandan trained adults to categorize the challenges into meaningful clusters; and subsequent qualitative and quantitative analysis to create locally meaningful and methodologically robust challenge clusters. As was suggested by the social ecological framework of this dissertation (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), this

study revealed that northern Ugandan young people felt challenged by a myriad of factors that can be situated on both the individual level and multiple influence spheres of the social milieu surrounding them. Moreover, the reported challenges represented a mixture of factors resulting directly from exposure to warfare, destitute environmental conditions for human development that it had amplified, and more structural factors that shaped the stressful context of daily life in its aftermath. With regard to the explored difference between formerly recruited and non-recruited youths, only a few noteworthy and significant differences appeared. Emotional challenges were most frequently reported by former child soldiers and considerably more in comparison with their non-recruited counterparts, which revealed that emotional distress constituted a major source of concern for former child soldiers. This finding is in line with other research findings on the emotional distress experienced by former child soldiers (Blattman & Annan, 2010) and confirms the findings of the previous study in this dissertation (*chapter 3*). Besides, relational and social challenges were generally less reported by formerly recruited youths, with the remarkable exception of stigmatization. Stigmatization constituted a major and more direct challenge for them and was clearly associated with psychosocial distress, as indicated in the previous study of this dissertation (*chapter 3*). The preponderance of stigmatization may explain the remarkable finding that other relational and social challenges were less reported, although they were still pertinent to a considerable number of the former child soldiers (Hobfoll, 1989). The nature of the other reported challenges indicated that the concerns of former child soldiers extended well beyond the direct consequences of warfare and covered a range of challenges related to, among other things, training and skills, their economic situation, broader cultural and societal practices and war-related living conditions. This finding corroborates the conclusion of the second study of this research (*chapter 3*). Moreover, it appeared that there was large parity between formerly recruited and non-recruited young people's challenges, since these challenges seemed to emanate from the deleterious impact of warfare on the communal fabrics of society. The pertinence of educational and economic challenges, among the most reported challenges for formerly recruited and non-recruited youth, may indicate that educational and economic hardship created a major concern for former child soldiers and weighed profoundly on their psychosocial well-being, as indicated by the findings of the previous study (*chapter 3*) and other research findings (Betancourt, Borisova, Rubin-Smith, Gingerich, Williams, & Agnew-Blais, 2008; Blattman & Annan, 2010; Wessells, 2006b). However, these hardships were a concern to many young people in this area. These findings illustrated that most of the challenges experienced by former child soldiers were

shared in common with their non-recruited counterparts, illustrating that warfare inflicted on the physical, social, educational and economic dimensions of their lives and had a deleterious impact on the larger social ecology. There is need to acknowledge the growing body of evidence that conceptualizes war and child soldiering as mass casualties, inflicting challenges on a systemic level that branch down to challenges for individuals (Hobfoll, Horsey, & Lamoureux, 2009; Wessells, 2006b).

Despite the formidable challenges that former child soldiers encountered and the psychosocial distress this may have caused, a literature review revealed that not all of them manifested profound or persistent psychological distress and that many managed to function well amidst ongoing hardship (Betancourt, Brennan, Rubin-Smith, Fitzmaurice, & Gilman, 2010; Boothby, Crawford, & Halperin, 2006; Cortes & Buchanan, 2007; Dowdney, 2007; Klasen, Oettingen, Daniels, Post, Hoyer, & Adam, 2010; Veale, 2010). This was deemed an interesting finding in the light of the resource-based, strengths-oriented focus adopted in this dissertation (Hobfoll, 2002) and thus prompted further research on what helps formerly recruited young people to deal with the challenges they encounter and to maintain or regain well-being in the aftermath of child soldiering (*study 3, see 2.4*).

9.2.4 Resources

Research on the individual variations in how people responded to adversity and that seemed to protect some of them against the full impact of this adversity had engendered the insight that resources played an important role in offsetting distress and fostering resilience (Caplan, 1974; Hobfoll, 1989, 2002; Kelly, 1966; Sarason, 1974; Sarason & Lorentz, 1979). This stimulated further research on the resources that former child soldiers use and the value that these resources have for their transition.

For this reason, the third study was partially dedicated to the identification of what former child soldiers experienced as resources for their psychosocial well-being, thereby taking into account potential similarities and differences with their non-recruited counterparts (*chapter 5*). This study took a contextually grounded, participatory approach of eliciting the most pertinent resources as considered by formerly recruited and non-recruited northern Ugandan young people. These freely listed resources were thematically categorized on the basis of the Psychosocial Working Group's conceptual model that discerned three main resource domains and envisioned significant exchange of resources over these domains. The study

findings revealed that former child soldiers' most valued resources were religious beliefs, social support and their coping strategies, which the conceptual model regarded as cultural capital, social capital and human capital, respectively. This supported the view that individuals and their socio-cultural environment are endowed with a rich repertoire of resources (Hobfoll, Freedy, Lane, & Geller, 1990). In general, there were only minor differences in resources with non-recruited young people, which indicated generally comparable utilization and accessibility of resources between formerly recruited and non-recruited youths. Besides, the findings demonstrated the dynamic exchange of resources in function of the communal and individual well-being. This study thus pointed to the richness and diversity of resources that were on hand for former child soldiers and other young people in northern Uganda, which was an interesting finding given the context that is often considered to be resource-poor as a consequence of the devastating warfare. The study also pointed to the important intersections between individual and collective resources and processes. All this supported the conceptualization of resilience beyond the individual level, thereby encompassing the sources and processes of support in the surrounding community and larger social ecology with which the individual interacts (Masten, 2007; Tol, Jordans, Reis, & de Jong, 2009; Wessells, 2012).

While these findings shed light on which resources were helpful to former child soldiers, a literature review indicated that the question why these resources were helpful remained largely unaddressed. For this reason, the fourth study was partly designed to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning former child soldiers assign to these resources, based on their lived experience (*chapter 6*). In-depth interviews were conducted with a selected set of formerly recruited young people. The phenomenological hermeneutical method led to the identification of resources' fourfold meaning, which was interpreted against the theoretical background of transition literature (De Boeck & Honwana, 2005; Grimes, 2002; Jareg, 2005; Turner, 1967; van Gennep, 1960). Firstly, the resources helped former child soldiers to break with their past and to physically and symbolically disconnect from the child soldier state. Secondly, resources facilitated the ability to gradually overcome the physically and psychologically demanding position and the existential challenges that former child soldiers encountered after departing from the armed faction. Thirdly, resources were helpful because they stimulated mutual adjustment efforts of former child soldiers and their surroundings, which contributed to a sense of belonging to others and to the environment. Fourthly, the resources helped in becoming self-actualized and full members of the

society, with an orientation towards the future. All this indicated that the meaning of resources was connected to former child soldiers' sense of identity and belonging in the wake of child soldiering and that the central value of the resources resided in the cultivation of a meaningful civil identity and role (Annan et al., 2009; Corbin, 2008; Lorey, 2001; Wessells, 2006b). This study therefore revealed former child soldiers' primary valued ends/needs during transition and showed that contextual support and satisfaction of these ends/needs by means of resources possibly contributes to resilient processes in the aftermath of child soldiering (Ryan, 1995).

Moreover, this study shed light on the resourceful characteristic of the major resources identified in the third study (*chapter 5*) and reveals that religious beliefs, social support and coping strategies can serve multiple purposes, from gaining courage to forget about the past, to remaining hopeful with regard to the future. Further interpretation of these resources in the light of the major challenges reported by formerly recruited youth (*chapter 4*) indicates that these main resources might be an immediate response to the encountered emotional challenges (e.g., avoidant coping strategies might help to forget about the past war-experiences that cause emotional discomfort) and stigmatization (e.g., supportive social relationships might help to foster the sense of belonging in the face of stigmatization). While resources such as religious beliefs, social support and coping strategies do not seem to directly compensate educational and economic hardship, they can form sources of strength that help not to succumb to these challenging living conditions. In order to explore this dynamic between challenges and resources and to understand how their interplay shapes the transition trajectory, further research (*study 4, see 2.5*) was designed around this research question.

9.2.5 Transition trajectories

The study on the challenges and resources generated knowledge regarding the key structural elements in former child soldiers' transition (*study 3, see 2.3 & 2.4*). However, the general paucity of studies that focused also on the dynamics of addressing challenges and of using resources prevented a full understanding of their role in post-child soldiering transition. In order to contribute to a richer and more meaningful understanding that added to the general factors and broader patterns identified on the basis of the third study, the fourth study further examined former child soldiers' life stories of transition.

The fourth study (*chapter 7*) consisted of individual in-depth interviews integrating aspects of the Life-line Interview Method (LIM) and the Retrospective Interview Technique (RIT) to stimulate visual sense-making as a means of revealing the participants' lived experiences of transition. Analysis of the ensuing RIT-graphs revealed four types of trajectories, that in the broader literature on post-adversity transition had been conceptualized as 'expeditious recovery', 'protracted recovery', 'eventual breakdown' and 'severe persisting distress'. This points to the heterogeneity and complexity of transition trajectories, and indicates that while some former child soldiers' trajectories depict a resilient response, such is not the case for all of them. Interpretative phenomenological analysis of the LIM-life lines of four selected cases, one for each type of trajectory, revealed that the identified child soldiering-related and post-child soldiering challenges were typified by a degree of 'loss' that either affected former child soldiers and their surroundings or was threatening to do so. This loss often occurred in the individual's surroundings, such as loss of parental support figures or social institutions, which illustrated the ways in which loss of communal resources branched down to great loss of resources for individuals. This illustrated the basic tenet of social ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and resource-based theory (Hobfoll, 2002), and provided additional insights in the association between contextual factors and individuals' psychosocial well-being, as was identified in the previous studies of this dissertation (*study 2 and 3*). The findings on loss also illustrated how warfare had transformed traditional sources of support into sources of distress. Especially situations of ongoing depletion of resources, of loss of unreplenishable resources, and of threat of the scarcely remaining resources overstretched the resource reservoir that former child soldiers had on hand to offset the challenges, thus resulting in loss sequels and distress. The findings further showed the active attempts of the participants to preserve and obtain resources, which were most successful and likely to result in gain cycles when being supported by the environment. Alternatively, it was equally important that environmental commodities were acknowledged and transformed into opportunities and resources by individuals. These findings indicated that both the objective availability and the perceived access to resources were crucial for successful management of resources, which enabled former child soldiers to halt the depletion of resources, utilize available resources they were endowed with or could access, and value the remaining resources in order to offset resource loss cycles and to gain resources.

This study illustrated and thereby substantiated resource-based theories that emphasize the relevance of resource loss and the risk of developing loss

cycles when resources become depleted and thus no longer sufficient to withstand the challenges encountered (Hobfoll, 1989; Layne, Beck, Rimmasch, Southwick, Moreno, & Hobfoll, 2009). This implies a constant need to nurture the resource reservoirs of people and communities in challenging situations, which formed the next major research question (*study 3, see 2.6*).

9.2.6 Supports for former child soldiers and their surroundings

Given the demonstrated importance of a balance between challenges and resources and the pressure that challenges exert on people's resource reservoirs (*study 4, see 2.5*), the presence of resources is not antithetical to the need for support of people living in challenging circumstances (Wessells, 2012). Previous research found that this support is to a considerable extent provided by informal support systems, such as families and peer groups, that can mediate the access to supplementary resources from the collective resource pool in the social ecology and thereby foster former child soldiers' resilience (Psychosocial Working Group, 2002; Hobfoll, 1989; Tol et al., 2009; Wessells, 2012). This raised the question as to what the role might be of formal support systems, such as governmental agencies and non-governmental organizations, when set alongside the support provided by informal support systems.

For this reason, part of the third study was a survey on what diverse informal and formal agents, including formerly recruited young people themselves, families, friends, communities, organizations and governments, could do to support former child soldiers. This study (*chapter 8*) thus explored the necessity and complementarity of informal and formal supports for former child soldiers, from the perspective of formerly recruited and non-recruited northern Ugandan youth. These two perspectives were integrated to evaluate whether the perceptions of formerly recruited youths were endorsed by their non-recruited age mates and to gain a preliminarily view on whether support for former child soldiers was encouraged by agents in their immediate environment. The findings indicated that former child soldiers recommended receiving support for a wide variety of resources, but mostly for their knowledge and skills, livelihood and mental health. When interpreting this finding in the light of the most pertinent challenges that former child soldiers identified in the previous study, clear parallels appeared with the need for support against educational challenges, economic challenges and emotional challenges, respectively. This probably indicated that the challenges threatened or even outweighed the resources in these life domains. The

other desired supports mainly pertained to the reconstruction of the social fabric and the development of social capacities, to strengthen the collective resource reservoir and thereby facilitate social support for former child soldiers, what in the previous study was evaluated as an important resource. To a lesser extent, it was recommended to support human rights and cultural issues to foster both rights-based and indigenous responses to challenges in the aftermath of war. Regarding the explored differences and similarities between the perspectives of formerly recruited and non-recruited youths, the findings indicated a largely comparable perspective, revealing that their age mates were willing to invest and exchange their own and communal resources in support of former child soldiers, but that former child soldiers in turn were expected to also invest in the shared socio-cultural fabric. In supporting these human, social and cultural resources, informal and formal agents were recommended to work towards similar goals.

These findings supported a notion of post-child soldiering resilience in terms of all social ecological levels, whereby the availability and exchange of resources on all these levels could contribute to the maintenance or recuperation of well-being (Tol et al., 2009). This study also generated concrete implications to move the field forward on the basis of the experience-based expertise of former child soldiers themselves.

9.3 Contribution to the theoretical framework on transition processes

This dissertation aimed to make a contribution to the theoretical framework on former child soldiers' transition trajectories, and on the encountered challenges and resources in the wake of child soldiering. These theoretical insights might not be limited to the transition of former child soldiers, but possibly also deliver insight that can contribute to the broader scientific knowledge base on challenges, resources, and resilience of populations in (post-)conflict settings. More research is required to test the broader contribution of this dissertation.

This study showed that the term 'child soldiers' covers a broad range of young people who have had diverging experiences and have in very diversified roles been associated with an armed faction, in this case with the rebel movement Lord's Resistance Army in northern Uganda. Diversity continued to characterize their trajectories after they emerge from the armed faction. The research illustrated assorted types of transition trajectories, some of them showing an erratic course, other trajectories

expeditiously or gradually evolving towards improvement and other trajectories bearing down to a decline in well-being over time. How former child soldiers' transition trajectories eventually unfolded for better or for worse depended much on the challenges they encountered and the resources they found in their transition. For this reason, studying trajectories should fundamentally start out with the identification of the challenges and resources and with the exploration of their dynamic interaction and fit, which requires a mixed methods design to capture its complexity, as was included in this dissertation (Rutter, 2006).

The spectrum of challenges faced by former child soldiers is broad and goes from direct, personal, proximal challenges over interrelational and communal challenges to indirect, macrolevel, distant challenges. The large-scale quantitative studies that had been designed to examine general factors and broader patterns in the post-child soldiering trajectories revealed the most pertinent challenges for former child soldiers and explained the role of these challenges in their longer term psychosocial well-being. The findings illustrated the pertinence of emotional challenges and stigmatization for former child soldiers in comparison with their non-recruited counterparts, indicating that the impact of child soldiering evolves along the lines of both psychological well-being and social well-being, which in addition were found to be strongly connected. This implies that the former child soldiers' transition from military to civilian life is as much social as individual. The comparison of challenges between formerly recruited and non-recruited youth shed light on the possible incremental impact of child soldiering, of which hitherto little is known due to a paucity of studies that have addressed this issue and included comparative evaluation in their design (Blattman & Annan, 2010). Moreover, the impressive amount of challenges that were related to the post-child soldiering living conditions, such as the lack of training and skills and the economic hardship, and the strong association of these post-child soldiering factors with the longer term psychosocial well-being supported the idea gradually more acknowledged that former child soldiers' transition probably depends relatively more on their experiences after than during child soldiering (Boothby, Strang et al, 2006). As such, this study delivered evidence relevant to the current debate about the importance of child soldiering-related and post-child soldiering factors in affecting psychosocial well-being in the wake of armed conflict (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010; Neuner, 2010). More concretely, this research delivered evidence that supports the inclusion of post-child soldiering variables in the analysis of associated factors of psychosocial well-being.

The in-depth qualitative studies, on the other hand, have clarified that the same challenging factors can be approached in different ways and therefore

might have a different weight in the transition of former child soldiers. Although certain challenges were pertinent to many formerly recruited young people, it appeared that they did not always have the same impact. Whether they actually resulted in psychosocial distress appeared related to the opportunities that people had to offset the ensuing loss and distress. These findings supported the conceptualization of challenges as *potentially* distressing and discouraged existing deterministic views on former child soldiers' future in unpromising circumstances (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986; Hobfoll,1989; Wolin, 2012). Hence, the challenges do not necessarily equal the needs that former child soldiers experience. This inherently implies rejection of the assumption that the impact of an adversity and any consequent challenges is broadly the same for everyone, as is often implicit in research on single challenges, or risk factors as they have often been termed (Rutter, 2006). The findings therefore support the key theoretical tenet of resilience theories, that the focus should shift from general challenging factors to individual variations in response to comparable challenges (Rutter, 2006). While such research on single challenges/risk factors has contributed greatly to the identification of salient sources of distress for people confronted with adversity and has explained much of the variance in their psychosocial well-being (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010; Rutter, 2006), identifying one or a series of isolated challenges does not suffice to capture the complexity of transition. This finding might be of value for the theoretical knowledge on people's responses to many other adversities in general. Regarding the leading research question of this dissertation, the research indicated that in order to understand former child soldiers' transition trajectory in terms of resilience or distress, the challenges should be considered against the backdrop of former child soldiers' valued ends, the resources they are endowed with to work toward these ends and the extent to which these resources and thus their valued ends are threatened.

Resources thus play a crucial role in protecting former child soldiers from the full impact of challenges, which has led to observations of resilient responses to experiences that are expected to affect psychosocial well-being (Luthar, 2006; Masten, 2001; Rutter, 2006). The large-scale quantitative studies that were designed to examine general factors and broader patterns in the post-child soldiering trajectories allowed to identify the most pertinent resources for former child soldiers and clarified that the presence of advantageous living conditions is associated with less psychosocial distress in the longer term. The findings illustrated the broad spectrum of phenomena with resourceful characteristics, of which religious beliefs, social support and coping strategies were the most significant for the

former child soldiers in this study. Hence, this study provided knowledge on what helped former child soldiers to deal with transition and what are key fundamental resources for them, which had hitherto remained largely unexplored due to the leading problem-oriented focus of research (Betancourt, 2011). Exploration of differences between formerly recruited and non-recruited youths showed largely comparable resources, which indicated that, despite the stigma that was especially inflicted on them and often resulted in discrimination (Betancourt, Agnew-Blais, Gilman, Williams, & Ellis, 2010; McKay & Mazurana, 2004), former child soldiers seemed able to access the communal resource reservoir to a level that equalled that of non-recruited youth. The myriad of identified resources demonstrated the considerable resourcefulness of the setting in which this study was conducted, contrasting to the prevailing perceptions of war-affected settings as resource-poor environments that are in need of the massive insertion of external resources (Psychosocial Working Group, 2002).

The in-depth qualitative studies further revealed that warfare in general and child soldiering in particular had severely affected the communal resource reservoir and the social attitude towards former child soldiers, but also indicated the restorative and proactive attempts that these formerly recruited young people and their surroundings undertook to strengthen them in the wake of child soldiering. These studies additionally revealed that resources were actively exchanged over different social ecological layers and that diverse agents in the environment might act as vehicles facilitating or inhibiting the access to the communal resource reservoir. This dissertation indicated that since resources play a pivotal role in offsetting distress and shaping resilience when confronted with challenges (Boothby, Strang et al., 2006; Hobfoll, 2002; Psychosocial Working Group, 2002), that resilience of formerly recruited young people can be fostered through the sources and processes of support in the context into which they develop their lives. Unlike traditional approaches to resilience that have conceptualized it in individual terms (Masten, 2007), this dissertation promoted a renewed conceptualization of resilience beyond the individual level, including human, social, material and cultural resources and processes that enhance the likelihood of maintaining or regaining psychosocial well-being in the wake of adversity. This could be termed ‘community resilience’, or even ‘ecological resilience’ when all social ecological layers are involved (Tol et al., 2009; Wessells, 2012). Such a conceptualization warns against narrowing down the concept of resilience to an individual trait, which would imply the risk of holding formerly recruited individuals culpable for failing to show resilient responses when facing challenging circumstances

(Mancini & Bonanno, 2010), while in fact their surroundings play an important role in enabling individual resilience.

Furthermore, individual and communal resources were found to support formerly recruited young people in the pursuit of their valued ends. The study also shed light on what these valued ends are for them, which is fundamental for a contextualized understanding of the efforts they undertake, the distress they experience and the ways in which they can best be supported (Boothby, 2008; Layne, Warren, Watson, & Shalev, 2007; Luthar, 2006; Pat-Horenczyk, Rabinowitz, Rice, & Tucker-Levin, 2009). It was revealed that former child soldiers aim to break with their child soldier state and that resources are valued when helping to forget the past. These apparent avoidance strategies defy dominant Western views that avoidance is a symptom of post-traumatic stress and that the best way to deal with difficult experiences is by talking them through and gaining control/managing them (Kostelny, 2006; Wessells, 2006b). This implies that people's responses to adversity should always be contextualized and considered in the light of cross-cultural differences in understanding and responding to psychosocial distress. It also illustrates that Western understandings of distress and coping are culturally construed and far from universal, in contrast with the way they are often presented and imposed in culturally dissimilar settings. The findings further indicated that former child soldiers were challenged to gradually retrieve a sense of identity and belonging and to develop a civilian identity and role that fits with the altered context they find themselves in, which points to the transformative character of their transition rather than that it is a return to their lives before child soldiering (McCallin, 1995; Somasundaram, 2002). Moreover, their orientation to the future entails that societies should create opportunities and support for former child soldiers to grow and continue developing themselves into competent, functional adults (Wessells, 2006b). This study thus added to the knowledge base on transition by revealing which valued ends are pursued by former child soldiers and what can help them to obtain their valued ends.

Additionally, this study indicated that transition conveys a notion of transformation that results out of the integration of alternating reciprocal processes that grow into something new. This illustrates the limitations and inappropriateness of concepts that inherently imply a return to the previous situation, i.e. re-habilitation and re-integration of former child soldiers (Wessells, 2006b). These concepts are obviously misnomers and thus need redefinition, or the transformative processes they entail require a new term that represents the search for new ways of living and living together. In this dissertation, the term 'transition' was proposed to represent the reciprocal

process that requires both self-transformation and social transformation to obtain a new, integrated state.

In conclusion, the theoretical contribution of this dissertation can be summarized as follows. This dissertation revealed that the concept of 'former child soldiers' covers a heterogeneous group of young people with miscellaneous experiences of child soldiering, and that the concept of 'transition' encompasses complex and heterogeneous trajectories to a transformed state, which has important implications for the theoretical frameworks of these concepts. Another important contribution of this dissertation lies in its approach to transition, which indicated that it should be conceptualized as a transformative process that requires more than a unidirectional or single point effort and often unfolds to a situation that is essentially different from the situation before child soldiering. This dissertation further demonstrated that challenges and resources emanate from diverse social ecological levels and are thus to a great extent part of the social fabric of life. Besides, it was concluded that these challenges and resources should not be addressed as isolated factors, but instead should be integrated in a holistic approach that starts from the individual variations in response to adversity and embraces the entire transition process as a whole, thereby incorporating the dynamic interplay and fit between challenges and resources and the extent to which these foster or hinder former child soldiers' valued ends. The research findings also urge for a culturally sensitive approach of people's interpretations and responses to challenges, and more specifically stimulates a discussion on certain responses that can be considered as problematic psychological symptoms versus helpful coping mechanisms. In addition, the dissertation illustrated that the conceptualization of resilience should extend far beyond the individual level and necessarily should include resources and supports from the larger social ecology that can considerably facilitate or inhibit former child soldiers' resilience. By doing so, this dissertation conceptually integrated the basic tenets of social ecological systems theories (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and resource-based theories (Hobfoll, 2002), which appeared to be a helpful lens through which to further understand the transition of former child soldiers. Given the complementarity of the findings generated through larger-scale quantitative studies and the in-depth qualitative studies, this dissertation also illustrated the value of a mixed methods approach to the transition of former child soldiers, whereby the integration of complementary nomothetic and ideographic perspectives brought the theoretical understanding on a higher quality level. All this also implies the inappropriateness of a singular normative framework or formulaic approach to the transition of former child soldiers.

9.4 On orthopedagogics as an integrative and practice-oriented scientific discipline

This dissertation positions itself within orthopedagogics, which is a scientific sub-discipline of pedagogy that focuses on the integration of paradigms, theories and methods in pursuit of meaningful action in special pedagogical situations (Broekaert, 2009). For this reason, this dissertation also aimed to contribute to the development of the pedagogical thinking and acting in situations of armed conflict. Situations of armed conflict that involve child soldiers are approached from many disciplines, and can be seen as orthopedagogical cases in which the question arises how to deal with child soldiering practices and which urge for reflection on interventions that contribute to supportive surroundings. Since orthopedagogics is an integrative and practice-oriented scientific discipline that combines multiple disciplinary perspectives on the shared study domain, this dissertation is also situated on the intersection between orthopedagogics and its allied pedagogical disciplines (De Ruyter, 1994). This dissertation can in part be situated in social pedagogy given that, unlike most other studies on former child soldiers that have solely focused on intrapersonal processes as the essential unit of analysis, this research has markedly emphasised the relational and communal aspects of transition and of gradual identity acquisition and inclusion into society (Pretorius, 1976). Besides, the dissertation also entered the field of critical pedagogy, in its incorporation of societal structures as possible barriers or facilitators of people's resources and transition in the wake of child soldiering. In order to warrant both collective and individual interests in such situations, this dissertation considered child-, relational-, and societal aspects and the links between these aspects as the key factors in understanding transition in the wake of child soldiering and in developing adequate interventions for these special pedagogical situations.

The dissertation also embodied the orthopedagogic discipline in its adoption of alternative cohering paradigms and methods to study former child soldiers' situation. The dialectic integration of paradigms and methods is believed to engender a transition of knowledge that brings it on a higher quality level (Broekaert, 2009). The dissertation approached its central research question from a mixture of scientific pedagogical paradigms and explored it through the adoption of mixed methods. The study of former child soldiers' war-related experiences and the associated factors of their psychosocial well-being in the longer term was grounded in a logical positivistic theoretical framework that uses nomothetic methods to identify

the underlying universal causal laws that govern and explain reality and more specifically human behavior (Broekaert, D'Oosterlinck, Van Hove, & Bayliss, 2004; Gergen, 2001; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Other studies that used elicitive, ideographic methods, preoccupied with studying the lived experience of people and understanding how they in particular contexts interpret and create their world, were grounded in an existential-phenomenological theoretical framework (Broekaert, 2009; Broekaert et al., 2004; Oancea & Pring, 2008; Van Manen, 1990). Additionally, the critical theoretical framework permeated studies that looked into potential social and societal barriers in former child soldiers' transition and that connected individual challenges and resources to the larger social context in which they were embedded (Broekaert et al., 2004; Freire, 1970; Horkheimer, 1982). This dissertation, by the dialectic integration of these paradigms and methods and thus by drawing on the benefits of orthopedagogics as an integrative practice-oriented scientific discipline, engendered the joint illumination of the phenomenon under study that surpassed in scope and quality the findings that would have resulted out of a single perspective (Pretorius, 1976).

With its fundamental orientation towards meaningful action in challenging pedagogical situations, orthopedagogics has a practice-oriented character and directs research towards the integration of knowledge and practice. For this reason, the research questions and overall aim of this dissertation reflected its intention to make a contribution to intervention strategies that aim to support the transition and improve the resources for former child soldiers and their communities as a whole. Because of the importance assigned to it, this contribution and the concrete implications for improving meaningful action concerning the situation of former child soldiers is given extensive attention in the remainder of this final chapter. Moreover, several efforts have been made to integrate knowledge and practice in the course of this doctoral research process. Each study was followed by the organization of a local workshop for stakeholders involved in policy or practice interventions for former child soldiers and other young people in northern Uganda. The aim of these workshops was to disseminate the theoretical contributions and the implications for interventions generated by this research. The contributions of this research were then subjected to dialogue with the stakeholders in the field and led to enhanced insights on the meaning and implications of the research findings for the concrete pedagogical praxis under study. This dissemination thus allowed to confront the theoretical findings with the empirical reality and to translate the research findings into meaningful pedagogical action. This gradually facilitated the process by which the outcomes of this research were further

diffused to partners in the field and infused into practice, a process which is currently still ongoing and is expected to lead to further practice-based research questions and theoretical developments.

Moreover, the practice-oriented nature of orthopedagogic research has the main task of identifying the modifiable and controllable aspects of the situation that may be targeted by orthopedagogical action (Freire, 1970; Pretorius, 1976). This research has focused on the individual former child soldiers' situation in the context of larger social ecological factors and processes, and found that certain contextual factors and processes were likely to inflict or offset distress, respectively. While far from all challenges or lack of resources were changeable because some implied a lasting change in the situation that could hardly be recovered, this dissertation revealed some ways in which unfavourable conditions and potential sources of distress could be modified and some ways in which favourable conditions and resources could be strengthened in order to develop supportive surroundings for formerly recruited young people (Betancourt & Khan, 2008; Loughry & Eyber, 2003; Stichick, 2001). The integrative character of orthopedagogics as science also translates into orthopedagogy as practice, which implies the need for integrated support systems existing of different complementing modalities that can jointly address the complexity of the reality without losing out of sight the need to tailor supports to the individual needs (Broekaert et al., 2004). These implications are discussed in the following section.

9.5 Contribution to psychosocial interventions

This dissertation generated important insights on former child soldiers' transition and the challenges and resources that shape its trajectory in the wake of child soldiering. These insights have pointed to the multitude of challenges that former child soldiers are likely to experience, but also to the importance of community and broader social ecological resilience in managing and exchanging resources. The role of formal support systems, such as governmental agencies and non-governmental organizations, has been explicitly explored from the perspectives of formerly recruited and non-recruited young people. Altogether, this has led to the following recommendations for policy and practice strategies that initiate psychosocial interventions for formerly recruited young people and their surroundings. While the uniqueness of each (post-)conflict situation and the diversity of each context requires cautiousness in defining general recommendations that are certainly applicable to other cases besides northern Uganda, corroboration of findings from other cases and general

guidelines on psychosocial interventions in situations of armed conflict make a compelling case for presenting some general *do's* and *don'ts* (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2007). The research findings mainly pointed to the importance of an integrated approach that covers multiple layers and sectors, while at the same time they indicated a differentiated approach that accounts for cultural and individual differences in the experience of transition, distress and resilience. Firstly, the concrete recommendations for integrated support are delineated, after which the recommendations for differentiated support are elucidated.

9.5.1 Integrated support

The multilevel and complex nature of the challenges and resources identified in this dissertation implies that the focus on healing individual psychological wounds of war should be complemented by mending the war-affected surrounding in all life areas and at all levels (Ager, Boothby, & Bremer, 2009; Miller & Rasco, 2004). It entails that the transition of former child soldiers requires an integration of multi-layered policy, research and practice initiatives oriented towards supporting formerly recruited adolescents and their surroundings, so as to develop holistic and sustainable systems of support (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2007). This recommendation illustrates the basic tenet of social ecological systems theory that emphasizes that children develop in the social milieu, existing of different layers and producing diverse types of influences on the individual's development and psychosocial well-being (Boothby, Strang et al., 2006; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The recommendation to organize integrated support systems conveys the idea that interventions should cover these diverse sectors and multiple levels of the context on a continuum of care.

9.5.1.1 Multi-layered support

Firstly, integrated support represents a multi-layered coverage of different social ecological levels. Action should be taken on the diverse levels, including the individual, the family, the peer group of young people, the societal system and the policy level (Hobfoll & Lilly, 1993). Previous research indicated that macrolevel influences, such as the political or economic climate of a country, mostly fall beyond the scope of psychosocial interventions (Kohrt et al., 2008; Miller & Rasmussen, 2010), yet this research indicated that these influences matter for many formerly recruited young people. Particular attention should go to supporting the linkages

between individuals, their immediate surroundings, larger social networks and societal structures, since all these systems own resources that may be transacted to nurture other systems (Psychosocial Working Group, 2002). A widely endorsed way of representing the multi-layered supports is in the form of an intervention pyramid as developed by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (2007). This intervention pyramid represents four layers of support, including bottom-up:

1) minimum responses of providing access to basic services for a general population (e.g., providing basic health care for all people – including formerly recruited youth)
2) assistance to help accessing family support and community services (e.g., family tracing and reunification of formerly recruited youth and other separated children)
3) focused non-specialized support for the smaller number of people who require more focused individual, family of community interventions (e.g., creating livelihood opportunities for formerly recruited youth)
4) specialized services for a smaller group of people with persistent problems (e.g., psychotherapy for formerly recruited youth with severe psychological distress).

Essential is that interventions should primarily be oriented towards the entire population and their communal processes, and subsidiary evolve to more categorical and specialized interventions to support individual processes of transition in the wake of child soldiering. The rationale behind this model is further discussed on the basis of the observations in this dissertation.

Large number of former child soldiers and scarce resources to be allocated

Although exact facts and figures on the number of former child soldiers in northern Uganda are not available due to a variety of reasons (Pedersen & Sommerfelt, 2007; Rodin & van Ommeren, 2009), its endemic nature became clear in the third study that involved stratified random sampling of approximately 1000 youths, and that appeared to comprise about a third former child soldiers. This estimation of the proportion of former child soldiers among northern Ugandan youth is in line with the findings of other studies that demonstrate the vastness and the institutionalized nature of child soldiering in this region (Annan, Blattman, & Horton, 2006; Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2008; Human Rights Watch, 2006; Pham, Vinck, & Stover, 2008). This indicates that the number of former child soldiers who might benefit from psychosocial interventions is high, which

contrasts sharply with the resources that are usually all too scarcely available to be allocated in psychosocial interventions. For this reason, community-centred support is often preferred in cases where the needs are high and resources to invest relatively low. This implies focusing the intervention on basic services for a general population and spreading the resources over a large scale, instead of concentrating the resources on highly specialized and costly interventions for a small number of people (Wessells, 2012). Additionally, by utilizing the basic resources that people already have, which are often naturally available and costless as was shown in this dissertation, interventions can reduce their general costs.

Intersections between individual and communal loss

As was demonstrated in this dissertation, the detrimental consequences of war in general and of child soldiering in particular very much afflict the shared social fabric, with the result that a great part of the challenges encountered by former child soldiers are communal in nature. In general, mass casualties such as armed conflict involve a massive loss of resources on a systemic level (Hobfoll et al., 2009; Kostelny, 2006). This implies that intervention strategies primarily should be oriented to the restoration and/or maintenance of the communal resource reservoir and of the social ecology (Hobfoll et al., 2009; Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2007; Miller & Rasco, 2004; Wessells, 2012). In this dissertation, the frequent cases of stigmatization of formerly recruited youth and of loss of support figures pointed to the importance of the social and collective dimension of transition in the aftermath of child soldiering. This motivates interventions to adopt a communal focus and to take a collective approach (Ager et al., 2009; Miller & Rasco, 2004; Wessells, 2012). Transition in the aftermath of child soldiering is therefore fundamentally a relational process of conciliating relationships, building social services, reawakening the traditional frameworks of meaning making, among others, which enable people to gain a sense of community and act as a community, to meet the basic needs and to perform the roles expected from them (Ager et al., 2009; Boyden & Gibbs, 1997; Miller & Rasco, 2004).

Acknowledgement of all victims

This dissertation revealed that many non-recruited young people experienced considerable challenges that are largely comparable to those of formerly recruited youth. This might indicate that they also experience challenging losses and distress related to warfare, which might also apply to the wider population in this war-torn context. Warfare, and especially child soldiering practices whereby every civilian is a potential victim and/or

perpetrator, create needs of coming to terms with the experienced injustice, of recognizing the own suffering and mending the destabilized social relationships, of compensating the harm and loss and hence of competing for the scarce resources (Derluyn & Broekaert, 2010). Unaddressed, these needs may hamper the reconstruction of the war-affected setting, undermine reconciliation of the war-affected population and consequently jeopardize former child soldiers' acceptance and integration. Therefore, responses to former child soldiers' needs should be clearly linked to the wider socio-political processes of reconstruction and reconciliation, assembling individual and collective post-conflict transition processes (Derluyn & Broekaert, 2010). Besides, interventions that are oriented towards the entire affected population instead of solely the individual formerly recruited young people are likely to avoid the side effect of social division that it often creates or reinforces in situations of mass casualty, and to prevent jealousy and stigmatization of formerly recruited beneficiaries (Wessells, 2012).

Reinforcement of informal support systems

Another argument for orienting support to larger social systems and for focusing on communal processes is the finding that, according to the young people consulted in this dissertation, formal support systems should largely provide the same kinds of support and work towards similar goals as the informal support systems. This dissertation clarified that social ecologies make up important informal support systems for formerly recruited young people, which fulfil a pivotal role in providing multifaceted support to them. Research has shown that the consequences of child soldiering are partially determined by the way former child soldiers' social ecologies are disrupted, since these social ecologies' capacity to support individuals might then be threatened or affected (Barenbaum, Ruchkin, & Schwab-Stone, 2004). Hence, it might be recommended for formal support systems to strengthen the resources and capacities of informal support systems to create supportive environments for former child soldiers (Boothby, Strang et al., 2006; Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2007; Psychosocial Working Group, 2002; Wessells, 2006b). Such community empowerment and collective action are regarded as the means to strengthen individuals and allow them to rebuild their lives in a supportive context (Freire, 1970).

9.5.1.2 Multi-sectoral support

Secondly, integrated support entails a multi-sectoral coverage of different life areas. The diversity and the inter-sectoral character of the identified challenges and resources indicate that a wide range of interventions –

organized from within different sectors – have implications for the psychosocial well-being of people in situations of armed conflict. Hence, even though for instance livelihood support might not be considered a core task of psychosocial agencies, it will most likely have beneficial effects because it tackles a significant source of psychosocial distress (van Ommeren & Wessells, 2007; Williamson & Robinson, 2006). This implies that interventions ideally but not necessarily cover multi-sectoral areas, since integrated supports can also be obtained by a common search of diverse psychosocial agencies for complementarity and coordination of their interventions. The coordination of these multi-sectoral complementary supports deserves priority since it can enhance the efficiency of interventions and can prevent that these develop as separated or even competing approaches (Pick & Sirkin, 2010; van Ommeren & Wessells, 2007; Wessells, 2006a). More concrete guidelines on the organization and coordination of multi-sectoral supports are provided by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee guidelines on mental health and psychosocial support in emergency settings (2007). An integrated approach of the health, political, economic, and education system and the individual's capability to access and utilize such systems is likely to result in positive capabilities for both the individual and societal development (Pick & Sirkin, 2010). Psychosocial interventions should thus be drawing on the intersections between diverse sectors and on inter-sectoral synergies (Wessells, 2006a). Given that the findings of this dissertation emphasize the emotional challenges, stigmatization, educational and economic challenges for former child soldiers, more concrete recommendations are devised for interventions on these domains.

Emotional challenges

This dissertation revealed that many formerly recruited young people suffer, to a greater or lesser extent, from the horrifying atrocities that they experienced as victims, witnesses or perpetrators. Many among them had recurring front row experiences with physical and sexual abuse, killing of loved ones, maiming and torturing of innocent civilians, among other excruciating atrocities. As a result, the emotional scars persevered years after they had been inflicted and became visible in the prevalent observations of diverse psychological symptoms throughout this dissertation. The accounts in this dissertation of formerly recruited youth speak of fear, nightmares, losing senses, seeing images of the past, disturbance by souls of death people, suicidal ideation and a range of other symptoms of distress related to the emotionally challenging experiences that these young people had in the past. Besides, challenging and potentially

distressing daily living conditions in the aftermath of child soldiering might also account for considerable emotional distress, as expressed in the frequent reports of 'overthinking' the difficult living situation, the daily task to insure the basic needs and the stigmatization inflicted upon them (Miller & Rasco, 2004; Miller & Rasmussen, 2010; Wessells, 2006b). While it goes without saying that these emotional challenges require focused psychosocial support, evidence about what kind of support works best for what people under what circumstances remains largely undocumented (Psychosocial Working Group, 2002; Tol & van Ommeren, 2012). However, there appears to be increasing consensus about the steps to take in addressing emotional challenges (Intern-Agency Standing Committee, 2007; Tol & van Ommeren, 2012; Tol et al., 2011; van Ommeren & Wessells, 2007). A first step is to explore local idioms and perspectives on emotional distress and to build on the culturally construed ways of dealing with distress. This dissertation revealed that when experiencing emotional challenges, formerly recruited young people in northern Uganda find support in, for instance, the advice and guidance provided by their loved ones and support figures in the community, in the religious beliefs and practices that they share in common with other people, and in their own attempts to avoid 'overthinking' and to forget the past experiences they had. Trough the strengthening of these natural resilient responses to emotional distress and by embedding these in a comprehensive continuum of psychosocial care, many people will be able to deal sufficiently with the emotional challenges they encounter (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2007; Wessells, 2012). Other people who experience severe emotional distress might require more specialized clinical approaches that should be offered by trained professionals after they have been adjusted to the concrete reality, so that they resonate the culturally defined frameworks of understanding and responding to emotional distress (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2007; Tol & van Ommeren, 2012). All this implies that the continuum of support for emotional challenges should evolve from a holistic non-specialized approach to a focused, clinical approach.

Stigmatization

Stigmatization of formerly recruited young people has been a prevalent and distressing social phenomenon in northern Uganda and other countries (Betancourt, Agnew-Blais et al., 2010; Wessells, 2009a). Stigmatization often stems from underlying negative social attitudes towards and perceptions about former child soldiers and their involvement in the conflict (Wessells, 2009a). In order to make a sustainable difference in the social attitude towards formerly recruited young people, change should occur from within

communities rather than by outside didactic awareness-raising approaches, as should always be the case when attempting to influence harmful norms or practices (Mackie & LeJeune, 2009). While educative and sensitization activities might have their merits and lead to change, they risk not to represent local cultural values and therefore to be perceived as alien or externally imposed, leading to ambivalence towards change (Wessells, 2009b). Sustainable change of vested social or cultural practices therefore requires a transformative process that starts from within and with local commitment (Mack & LeJeune, 2009). For this reason, interventions should aim at understanding the factors that initiate and perpetuate stigmatization, so that the root causes of this deleterious social phenomenon are revealed and can be redressed. This dissertation already presented some of the potential underlying mechanisms of stigmatization of former child soldiers in northern Uganda, including negative attitudes towards previous involvement in LRA atrocities and fear for continued violent actions of formerly recruited young people in the community. In such cases, there is an obvious need to heal the collective wounds of war, created by divisive war strategies targeting civilians, such as the deployment of children as soldiers (Sarkin, 2012). During and subsequent to war and the gross human rights violations it incorporates, affected populations may need acknowledgement of the harm inflicted on them - not uncommonly by former child soldiers - which urges for transitional justice integrating issues of truth, justice, reconciliation and reparation (Viaene & Brems, 2010). In its absence, a culture of fear, perceived injustice and vengeance may prevail among the affected population, with the result that the experienced war-violence can weave its way into interpersonal relationships and specifically target those held accountable for the suffering (de Jong, 2002). To break the cycle of violence and adequately address issues of stigmatization, interventions therefore should entail a contextualized approach to transitional justice by creating a common ground, justice and conciliation, as well as to psychosocial well-being by engendering a broader social attitude change and mutual support within the entire community. This suggests that processes of transitional justice should be part of the broader integrated and differentiated continuum of psychosocial interventions. In tackling stigmatization, psychosocial agencies can work together with those local people who already question or even demur extant stigmatizing and discriminating practices in their community. This dissertation has indicated that, while many formerly recruited young people experience stigmatization, many of them also have supportive connections that might be concerned about the stigmatization and can be activated to do something about it, thereby facilitating social support for formerly recruited youth.

Educational and economic challenges

This dissertation also revealed that the lack of education or the uncertainty of future access to education formed a major challenge for many formerly recruited young people. Moreover, support for their knowledge and skills was markedly valued and education was considered a salient resource by many of them. As was also illustrated in this dissertation, education was valued in its own right but also as a means to obtain other valued ends. To begin with, education is vital because it normalizes life for many young people, enables their social integration, creates recreational time with peers, provides them with knowledge and skills, and often forms a protected environment in comparison with the expected labour at home (Arafat & Musleh, 2006; Kostelny, 2006; Nicolai & Triplehorn, 2003). Additionally, it facilitates the widening of their life options, the chances of becoming gainfully employed in the foreseeable future, and thus engenders a positive outlook on the future and hope for a better life (Arafat & Musleh, 2006; Kostelny, 2006). As such, education and schools as resourceful multi-functional settings have beneficial effects for personal, academic, social and economic development. These benefits clearly illustrate that education might be a key resource in helping formerly recruited young people to obtain their valued ends and to develop a meaningful civilian identity and role, as outlined in this dissertation (Arafat & Musleh, 2006). For young people to engage fully in social and societal life requires the initiation into the knowledge and life skills of their community and culture (Gabarino & Kostelny, 1996). For this reason, diverse modalities of informal and formal education have been attributed great potential for the promotion of young people's psychosocial well-being. Education, however, should not be presented as the normative approach since many young people have no history of schooling in the context of decades of warfare, nor do all formerly recruited young people have the desire to attend school after having spent years in an armed faction (Wessells, 2006b).

As a valuable alternative, economic support is often proposed for formerly recruited young people, including job skills, participation in income-generating activities and employment opportunities (Wessells, 2006a). Economic challenges form a major challenge for many formerly recruited youths and other young people growing up in impoverished post-conflict settings where levels of unemployment are typically high (Blattman & Annan, 2010; Betancourt et al., 2008; Wessells, 2006a). Concerns about economic hardship, and the idleness and hopelessness that it often produces, weigh profoundly on the psychosocial well-being of formerly recruited young people who seek to secure their economic survival, obtain assets to build their emerging adult lives independently and fulfil a

meaningful role in society (Wessells, 2006a). For this reason, economic support may form a pivotal aspect of psychosocial interventions for formerly recruited youth. A common example of economic support for former child soldiers is income-generating activities, which typically imply that material and/or financial donations are made to initiate economic activities that help to recuperate or strengthen livelihood systems and to meet the basic needs and food supplies in a sustainable manner through the income they produce (ACF International, 2009). However, caution is required to not solely orient livelihood supports to former child soldiers, as research has indicated the negative, divisive side effects of such privileged supports in a context wherein nearly every young person is facing economic hardship (Blattman & Annan, 2008; Wessells, 2006a). Consequently, economic support should be organized as part of an integrated support system, oriented to the general population and to the different social ecological layers. This implies that economic initiatives on the microlevel, such as microcredits and business training of individuals or groups of individuals, are strongly embedded in initiatives that reach up to the macrolevel, and for instance target job opportunities and economic welfare.

What is probably the most important about educational and economic support is its potential to meet formerly recruited young people's concern about whether the future holds a meaningful place for them (Machel, 2001). In order to meet this concern and enhance the effectiveness of both types of supports, educational opportunities should go hand in hand with livelihood opportunities (Wessells, 2006a). Such opportunities are ideally shaped at the macrolevel of social ecologies, indicating that governments and their policy strategies have an important role to play here if they aim to pursue socio-economic development and tackle one of the root causes of armed conflict (Urdal, 2004). As such, educational and economic supports are vital for former child soldiers' transition in the wake of child soldiering but equally are vital supports for conflict prevention and peace building (Wessells, 2006a).

9.5.2 Differentiated support

A comprehensive response to child soldiering should also include a multiplicity of modalities that are tailored to the local context and individual situations (Wessells, 2009a). The recommended differentiation of support applies to the level of the culture and to the level of the individual (Berry, Poortinga, Breugelmans, Chasiotis, & Sam, 2011).

To begin with, the rationale for differentiated support logically follows from the culturally diverse contexts in which interventions for former child soldiers are developed. Each culture has its own ways of interpreting and responding to psychosocial distress. Besides, the resources that are valued and ranked as significant are a reflection of the underlying culture (Hobfoll, 2001). This research revealed that for northern Ugandan former child soldiers, religious beliefs, social support and coping strategies are the salient resources. Religion is strongly interwoven with daily life and an important framework of meaning making in Uganda, and religiosity appears to be an enormous source of strength for formerly recruited young people in this setting, which might be underestimated by whomever intervenes from a culture that is not so closely tied to its cosmologic framework (Kostelny, 2006; Laufer & Solomon, 2011; Maeland, 2010). Coping strategies may also differ cross-culturally, since culture has influence on the appraisal of stress and on the preference for certain coping strategies (Aldwin, 2007; Boothby, Crawford et al., 2006; Hobfoll, 2001; Jones, 2002). As was already illustrated, avoidance may in some cultures be perceived as a symptom of stress whereas in other cultures it might represent an effective coping strategy (Wessells, 2006b). This finding discourages and even considers it unethical to use culturally construed interventions 'off the shelf' without the necessary tailoring to culturally diverse settings (Kostelny, 2006; Wessells & Monteiro, 2001). The field is gradually more acknowledging these cultural determined variations and is taking efforts to develop interventions that are grounded in culturally sensitive frameworks (Bernal & Sáez-Santiago, 2006). Nonetheless, sound evidence-based culturally centred interventions still remain largely forthcoming (Bernal & Sáez-Santiago, 2006). Besides, cultural sensitivity requires a continuous and dialectic process of testing the cultural centeredness of interventions against the evolving cultural framework of any concrete setting (Lopez et al., 1989; Yeganeh, Su & Chrysostome, 2004). Without understanding the local cultures and without valuing the culturally relevant practices to support the transition of former child soldiers, external policies and interventions may fail to resonate locally and effectuate their goal (Mackie & Lejeune, 2009). Consequently, assessment of the local cultural contexts in which post-child soldiering transition is embedded, forms a first and foremost step in programming external policy and practice initiatives.

At the individual level, the need to differentiate support became apparent on the basis of the diversified child soldiering experiences and post-child soldiering trajectories of formerly recruited young people. The wide range of times spent with the rebel faction, the various ways in which recruited children are exposed to war-related adversity and the constellation of roles

they can fulfil within an armed faction results in the observation that former child soldiers may be affected at different levels and on different domains (Wessells, 2012). These factors may additionally be associated with the challenges they experience in the wake of their departure from the armed faction (Betancourt et al., 2008; Blattman & Annan, 2008). Besides, the myriad of challenging and resourceful factors that influence their post-child soldiering trajectories and the varying degrees of fit between challenges and resources may result in different degrees of vulnerability and resilience, which therefore generate very divergent needs for support (Hobfoll & Lilly, 1993). The resources that formerly recruited young people and their communities have on hand to actually deal with the consequences of warfare may differ from setting to setting under the influence of war-induced devastation, social norms, cultural practices, community structure, policy strategies and governance, among others, and therefore require tailored supports (Wessells, 2012). This diversity cautions against considering former child soldiers as a homogeneous group and indicates that a one-size-fits-all approach is inappropriate to address the disparity of needs (Wessells, 2009a). Since meaningful psychosocial support is grounded in an appraisal of how child soldiering might have affected each particular individual differently (Annan et al., 2006; Amone-P'Olak, 2008; Blattman & Annan, 2008; Wessells, 2009a), support should be differentiated and tailored to the individual needs and strengths. This is discussed in the following sections.

9.5.2.1 Developing interventions in partnership

In order to guarantee the goodness of fit between the intervention and the local context as well as people's needs, the development of interventions should be a joint venture between psychosocial agencies and local agents. This implies that relationships and even partnerships should be established that aim to elicit and utilize local people's knowledge on their situation, the major challenges that are faced and the key resources available to them (Hobfoll & Lilly, 1993; Kelly, 1988; Kostelny, 2006; Miller & Rasco, 2004). These partnerships should be created at various levels including individuals, communities and governments, since all these agents play an important role in the provision of support and can be empowered to co-construct supportive surroundings (Wessells, 2009a). This requires that, rather than approaching war-affected communities as sites of intervention and local people as passive beneficiaries, psychosocial agencies should acknowledge them as valuable partners and utilize the agentic and resourceful capacities they have for jointly organizing psychosocial interventions from within the community (Tol et al., 2009; van Ommeren & Wessells, 2007). Former child

soldiers too can be more than recipients of psychosocial interventions and may as partners with experience-based expertise be engaged in the process through which these interventions are developed (Boothby, Crawford et al., 2006; Wessells, 2006b). National and local governments can be involved as partners in the development of interventions and thereby be empowered to build the capacities of communities and all their citizens (Wessells, 2009a). In order to establish real partnerships, psychosocial agencies should be aware of possible power asymmetry that they might bring with them as alleged external experts (Kostelny, 2006).

There is need to create space to elicit, listen and learn how young people understand, interpret and re-interpret their situation against the backdrop of their context, how they make meaning of their environment and their own position in it, and how they appraise their child soldiering experiences and situation afterwards (Honwana, 2006). This will help to get a hand on what the concerned youngsters value and prioritize, and will unveil what external agents can learn from their experience-based expertise (Miller & Rasco, 2004; Wessells, 2006b). Instead of working top-down in determining the research questions, policy focus and intervention methods, the people whom it is supposed to benefit should be the ones co-designing interventions. More concretely, this implies cooperatively assessing their needs and priorities, identifying the available human capital and environmental resources, and paving the way ahead to improve their situation. For this purpose, participative methods that invite and create the space for people to express their own experiences and understanding of their situation are required to gain a genuine and thorough appraisal of the context. Unfortunately, the first steps of the program cycle wherein empirical assessment informs the design of the intervention is all too often skipped by psychosocial agencies under the pressure of the urgency of the intervention and the need for quick results to satisfy donors (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2007; Tol et al., 2009). Even for situations of humanitarian emergency that require a prompt response, diverse methodologies have been designed to allow a rapid assessment, such as the Participatory Ranking Methodology (Ager, Stark, Sparling, & Ager, 2011), Brief Ethnographic Interviewing (Hubbard, 2008), free listing and key-informant interviews (Bolton, 2001). Another incentive for psychosocial agencies to carry out preparatory assessments is that the information that is collected prior to the intervention and that reveals locally relevant focal areas will often provide psychosocial agencies with relevant indicators for evaluating the benefits and efficacy of their intervention (Hubbard, 2008; Tol & van Ommeren, 2012).

9.5.2.2 Assessment of the situation

To plan an appropriate response to situations of child soldiering, it is deemed important to know the extent and nature of encountered challenges and available indigenous resources, to understand how the resources can be helpful and further strengthened, and to estimate the extent to which people can access them. Hence, an analysis of the situation is a first and crucial step for developing differentiated interventions (Psychosocial Working Group, 2002; Tol & van Ommeren, 2012; Tol et al., 2011; Wessells, 2009a). More specifically, key to interventions that suit the concrete reality is a thorough appraisal of the challenges and resources in the given context (Bracken, Giller, & Summerfield, 1995; Psychosocial Working Group, 2002).

9.5.2.3 Assessing the challenges: which are defined as priority?

This dissertation has revealed the challenges that are differently experienced by formerly recruited and non-recruited young people in northern Uganda, which given their nature might be considered as the incremental impact of child soldiering compared to exposure to warfare in general (Blattman & Annan, 2010). The research on the association of the longer term psychosocial well-being with child soldiering-related variables and post-child soldiering variables indicated, however, that the impact of child soldiering should be sufficiently acknowledged but not lead to a narrow focus on war trauma, thereby excluding potentially distressing factors emanating from the post-child soldiering context. Moreover, the post-child soldiering factors are – unlike the experiences of child soldiering – to a certain extent modifiable by interventions (Betancourt & Khan, 2008; Loughry & Eyber, 2003; Stichick, 2001; Miller et al., 2008). Interventions therefore have the possibility to tackle unfavourable and challenging conditions such as poverty and social stigmatization and thereby prevent psychosocial distress, given that these conditions are shown to considerably challenge former child soldiers' resources and to deteriorate their psychosocial well-being (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010). Hence, psychosocial agencies can facilitate the development of a supportive post-child soldiering context for formerly recruited young people. For this reason, psychosocial interventions should start out with an assessment of the challenges that are significant to formerly recruited young people, in order to determine which challenges are amendable or can be countered by resources. Most importantly, however, is that these interventions address the challenges that are of concern to the people they are supposed to benefit, meaning that the intervention priorities should reflect the priorities of the communities (Miller & Rasco, 2004). This requires an assessment of the challenges that

are most significant to them, by using methods that allow them to express their ideas and concerns.

9.5.2.4 Assessing the resources: what do people and their informal support systems already do?

The urge to tailor interventions to the culturally specific setting and the individual needs of formerly recruited young people stimulate interventions to assess existing sources and processes of support. It also motivates psychosocial agencies to build on these indigenous resources, to strengthen the resource reservoir and thus build the capacity of people and communities to respond to the challenges they encounter (Wessells, 2012). A common flaw in humanitarian work, however, is that psychosocial agencies often rush in with highly specialized and professionalized support, without taking stock of how people naturally respond to adversity and its consequent challenges and of what basic supports and services are present (Boothby, Strang et al., 2006; van Ommeren & Wessells, 2007). Such interventions jeopardize and risk impeding the natural resources and processes of support that occur within communities (Wessells, 2009a). When confronted with adversity such as armed conflict, communities may engage in self-help processes and mobilize their resources to reform the disrupted social fabric of communal life and to prevent or offset harm for its people (Tol et al., 2009; Wessells, 2012). Some examples in this dissertation of resilient responses of communities are the organization of communal prayers and rituals upon one's return to the community; elders who fulfil an important advisory role in Ugandan communities and guide formerly recruited children with their advises and stories; community leaders who have the authority to assemble restorative meetings to resolve disputes; and community members who share basic necessities in support of other households. Supports and resources from the larger social ecological layers in which communities are embedded may additionally strengthen communities to respond resiliently to aversive events and to facilitate the larger benefits of their efforts (Masten & Obradovic, 2008; Wessells, 2012). Working with such indigenous resources has shown to result in more sustainable benefits and empowerment of people (Tol et al., 2009; Wessells, 2012).

9.5.2.5 Identifying people in the most vulnerable situations/in risk for loss cycles

This dissertation has corroborated resource-based theories (Hobfoll, 2002; Layne et al., 2009) by illustrating the relevance of resource loss and the risk

of developing loss cycles when resources are depleted and thus not or no longer available to counterbalance the loss. Hence, the prevention of resource loss (cycles) becomes a high priority, which requires the identification of those people at greatest risk of resource loss (Hobfoll, 2002; Layne et al., 2009; Wessells, 2006b). A crucial step of psychosocial interventions in the aftermath of child soldiering hence should consist of the follow-up of those former child soldiers that appear most vulnerable due to the nature and extent of their war-related experiences compounded by the challenging conditions of their life in the aftermath. These young people are expected to have the poorest resource reservoirs relative to the encountered challenges, and are most likely to find themselves in situations whereby the challenges clearly outweigh their resources (Hobfoll, 2002). As a result, young people who had been severely affected by warfare may encounter specific challenges or losses, and therefore value particular resources (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2007). In such cases, support from informal support systems might not suffice to alleviate the suffering of those with profound and persistent problems, so that additional specialized clinical interventions might be required to prevent further losses and distress. Regarding intervention strategies, it should therefore be noted that even though recommendations are made to mainstream basic psychosocial interventions on a collective level and move away from specialized, categorical interventions for former child soldiers, some formerly recruited young people might need more targeted and focused psychosocial interventions.

9.5.2.6 Strategically investing in resources

The extent to which ecological systems are able to manage and exchange their resources is of course in itself also severely influenced by warfare and therefore testifies to the resilience of a social ecology (Boothby, Strang et al., 2006; Hobfoll, 1998). Hence, it is plausible that the communal resource reservoir has been depleted and people's abilities and readiness to support one another have been affected by warfare. Besides, the ongoing challenges encountered in the aftermath of war may continue to exert pressure on the resource reservoir and resilience of a social ecology, which may in the face of initial resilience even lead to an eventual decline (Hobfoll, 1998; Layne et al., 2009; Masten & Obradovic, 2008). In other cases, the available resources may just not fit the demands and thus not be suitable to address the challenges that are experienced (Layne et al., 2009). As a consequence, the existence of resources should not be regarded as antithetical to the need for psychosocial interventions. Investment in resources should therefore remain a priority intervention in the aftermath of armed conflict (Hobfoll &

Lilly, 1993; Kelly, 1966; Norris & Kaniasty, 1996; Wessells, 2012). Interventions that aim to improve the access to and the use of resources have been evaluated as more efficient and sustainable (Hobfoll & Lilly, 1993; Sarason & Lorentz, 1979; Kelly, 1966; Trickett, 1984; Wessells, 2012). In addition, such interventions also increase the sense of ownership and have empowering effects on people they work with (Kostelny, 2006; Rappaport, 1977; Pick & Sirkin, 2010).

9.5.2.7 Determining what key resources should be strengthened or added

Some cases will be sufficiently supported when extant resources are revitalized, other cases might require the facilitation of people's access to resourceful environments, and still other cases will need additional key resources in order to gradually refill depleted reservoirs. Which intervention will be most appropriate will depend greatly on the contextual assessment of challenges and resources. Whatever intervention strategy is considered the most appropriate, it should always follow the principle of subsidiarity, which implies that a first step is to address the remaining resources that are on hand and to consider which of these resources need to be bolstered, and as a second step to consider which fitting key resources might additionally be added to offset resource loss and foster resilience (Layne et al., 2007). By bolstering or replenishing the resource reservoir, interventions thus support the resilience of communities, and prevent loss sequels and ensuing distress (Hobfoll & Lilly, 1993; Psychosocial Working Group, 2002; Wessells, 2012). The insights that this dissertation generated on why resources are valued and the valued ends that they help to achieve for former child soldiers may deliver guidelines for psychosocial agencies that aim to further develop resources. It enables intervention strategies to reinforce meaningful and inherently pre-existing pathways towards resilience and to be based on evidence about what is experienced to help in the wake of child soldiering (Annan et al., 2009; Jareg, 2005; Kostelny, 2006; Tol et al., 2009). This evidence indicated that support should essentially be oriented towards helping former child soldiers develop civilian identities and find a meaningful social role, so that they can become functional in their society (Betancourt et al., 2008; Boothby, Crawford et al., 2006; Unicef, 2007; Wessells, 2006b).

9.6 Methodological strengths and limitations

Although the strengths and limitations of each study have been discussed in the different chapters, there are some overarching methodological

characteristics of this research that should be acknowledged because they form the backdrop against which to interpret the general findings of this dissertation.

9.6.1 Strengths

9.6.1.1 Mixed methods design

Within the social and human sciences, the added value of a mixed methods approach to research is gaining more ground (Brannan, 2005; Creswell, 2009). A mixed methods design allows to compensate the biases inherent in any single method and allows to approach the research question from different permeable, complementary epistemological stances (Creswell, 2009). In this dissertation, the combination of large scale quantitative studies and in-depth qualitative studies has clearly generated complementary findings that brought the knowledge to a higher quality level. The quantitative methods were mainly designed to elicit general factors and patterns in the phenomena under study, whereas the qualitative methods were intended to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomena under study (Creswell, 2009; Marecek, 2003). Both types of analyses generated insights that added something to the insights collected through the other method. Hence, in this mixed methods design, each method elaborated or expanded the previous insights and together created a bigger picture (Brannan, 2005). As such, the mixed methods design served a larger, transformative purpose (Creswell, 2009).

9.6.1.2 Child perspective

An intrinsic merit of this dissertation is that the central research question was deliberately approached from the perspectives of those who have experienced it and thus had experience-based expertise. This research asked formerly recruited young people what has helped them to deal with their past experiences and present challenges in the course of their transition from military to civilian life. A larger benefit of involving the perspective of children in the assessment of their situation is that children tend to be involved and represented from the start, which gives policy makers and psychosocial agencies the opportunity to take into account these child perspectives in the development of psychosocial interventions (Tol et al., 2009). The subjective perspective of children and young people is gradually more valued as an indicator in monitoring their well-being, in contrast with the traditionally predominant adult-centric perspectives

(Aber & Jones, 1995; Ben-Arieh, 2010; Metts, Sprecher, & Cupach, 1991). However, in order to make valid estimations of child soldiers' transition and psychosocial well-being, multiple data-sources that elicit multiple perspectives are more desirable – of which the child's subjective perspective is a necessary component (Aber & Jones, 1995; Ben-Arieh, 2010).

9.6.1.3 Comparison of formerly recruited and non-recruited youth

A strength of this research is the inclusion of non-recruited young people in this study on former child soldiers, especially given that most studies have not included a comparison group and little is known about possible convergences and divergences between both groups (Betancourt et al., 2008; Kohrt et al., 2008). Most studies of this dissertation were conducted with a stratified random sample of northern Ugandan youth from diverse living areas and from in- and out-of-school populations. This contributed to the reduction of a potential selection bias. Although the group of non-recruited young people was not explicitly matched as a control group, the nature of the forced conscription in Uganda has generated the assumption that child soldiering was conditionally unconfounded in this context (Blattman & Annan, 2010). However, as a result of the cross-sectional research design, the comparisons are limited to the similarities and differences in the present situation and don't allow to compare the impact of warfare – including child soldiering – on formerly recruited and non-recruited young people in this research.

9.6.2 Limitations

9.6.2.1 Cross-sectional design

This study was designed to collect data about past and present experiences with the transition from military to civilian life. The cross-sectional design of this research is a considerable constraint, yet one of the few options to study the transition trajectories of former child soldiers in northern Uganda. In this case, most former child soldiers have left the rebel faction some years ago. This situation allowed to study their lived experience with transition and examine what had helped them in the process, but implied that the data were mainly collected at one point in time and that the research was largely based on retrospective accounts. This was partially compensated by the retrospective design of the first studies using datasets that were collected by Interim Care Centres at some point back in time. Unfortunately, such systematic data were rather scarcely available and also had their

limitations. In other cases, though, longitudinal study designs would be more appropriate to follow up the course of the transition. The cross-sectional research design implied limited options to examine causal relationships between child soldiering experiences, post-child soldiering challenges, resources and psychosocial well-being. Causal propositions cannot be tested by cross-sectional studies, since the possibility of alternative explanations for the observed correlations cannot be ruled out (Rindfleisch, Malter, Ganesan, & Moorman, 2008). Moreover, given that former child soldiers' transition is a long term process and has a dynamic course (Felner, Farber, & Primavera, 1983; Hobfoll, 1989), the cross-sectional design might not have allowed to capture the longer term evolutions in transition and therefore rather present a snapshot in time (Williams, 2007).

9.6.2.2 Retrospective self-report data

An important implication of the cross-sectional design is that this study is largely based on retrospective self-report data. The limits of retrospective self-report data are well documented and mainly relate to potential biases in memory and information-processing capacities (Metts et al., 1991; Nisbett & Ross, 1980; Pearson, Ross & Dawes, 1994). Biases in recalling are the more likely to occur the longer the time is between the experience and recalling the experience, and the less significant the experience is to the person (Metts et al., 1991). While the significance of the child soldiering experience has not been questioned by the participants in this research, the relatively long time between their departure from the armed group and the moment of participation in the research might have contributed to potential biases in recalling. In addition, biases may also relate to personal perception of the experiences, which is influenced by the tendency to underestimate the impact of external factors and overestimate the impact of personal factors, the tendency to give more weight to negative information, and the tendency to give socially desirable responses (Metts et al., 1991). Moreover, the way that people remember their experiences and narrate these are in constant flux and what they chose to include, omit or concentrate on can differ depending on their frameworks of meaning making, the purpose of their account, the audience that they are telling their story to and many different other aspects (Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2008). Given these possible constraints, the research questions and design took into account the specific nature of retrospective self-report data by deliberately studying the subjective significance of challenges and resources rather than their objective availability, by examining the meaning of resources based on the participants' lived experiences, and by exploring the participants'

perspectives on the potential contributions of informal and formal support systems, among other examples. Nonetheless, this research might be limited by the absence of supplementary objective assessments to verify the participants' accounts. As a consequence, retrospective self-report data are not amenable to test for accuracy, but they provide a valuable insight that in most cases, including the case of this research, could not be generated by other methods (Aber & Jones, 1995; Metts et al., 1991). In this case, retrospective self-reporting was the most achievable method that could be used to study the participants' transition trajectories. This method also allowed studying the dynamic and complex nature of transition trajectories and the intensity and valence of the experiences that shape these trajectories (Metts et al., 1991).

9.6.2.3 Resilience

A major limitation to this dissertation is that the studies did not involve a dependent psychosocial variable that could indicate whether the formerly recruited young people were experiencing distress or resilience as the consequence of the balance between challenges and resources. Such an assessment could have brought into consideration whether resources indeed stimulated resilient responses and challenges were producing psychosocial distress (van Ommeren, 2003). This has, however, been a deliberate choice in the study design on the basis of the observation that there was no consensus about the conceptualization and operationalization of 'resilience' (Kaplan, 2005) and that resilience is a multi-faceted construct that requires extensive assessment efforts (Masten, 2007; Tol et al., 2009). Given the central research question of this dissertation, such an extensive assessment would have led us too far beyond the aims of this research, and therefore was not included. As a result, the estimations about the impact of challenges and resources are mainly based on the accounts of formerly recruited young people. This is a general constraint in this field, since virtually no representative data or well-identified causal estimates exist about the resilience of formerly recruited young people (Blattman & Annan, 2010).

9.6.2.4 Integration of limited perspectives

The dissertation is grounded in a conceptual integration of social ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and resource-based theory (Hobfoll, 2002). The research findings make a compelling case for the importance of communal processes and collective challenges and resources in the wake of child soldiering. From this perspective, it can thus be

considered a limitation that this study occurred solely on the individual level while ideally the challenges and resources should be analysed from all levels of the social ecology. While increasingly more studies on former child soldiers and other youth in situations of armed conflict are rooted in social ecological frameworks, these studies seldom include a social ecological analysis, rendering this a large hiatus for research' current state of the art (Miller & Rasco, 2004). In order to fully grasp the impact of armed conflict and child soldiering on the social fabric of affected communities, studies should ideally be conducted at wider social ecological levels (Miller & Rasco, 2004).

9.6.2.5 Generalization

This research was restricted to the region of northern Uganda, and while this regional demarcation allowed to study this case in-depth, it constraints the generalizability of the research findings. Academic literature has pointed to the culturally construed ways of interpreting and responding to challenges, which implies that people who share the same culture are likely to also share these cultural scripts and conventions (Berry et al., 2011; Hobfoll, 2001). An implication of this observation is thus that the interpretations and responses to challenges also may differ between diverse cultural settings. As a consequence, the generalization of the research findings in this dissertation might be constrained by the context-specific nature in which the research was carried out. The limited generalizability of contextually specific and culturally sensitive research findings have been widely acknowledged in cross-cultural psychology (Berry et al., 2011). Nonetheless, culture-comparative research on resources and resilience has identified cross-cultural similarities and even seemingly universal characteristics and patterns in dealing with challenges and managing resources (Hobfoll, 2002). The opinions about generalizability in the field of cross-cultural psychology are very divided between cultural relativists and universalists, and have led to the belief that there are different levels of generalization (Berry et al., 2011). A compromise that is recently gaining most support is the acknowledgement that cross-cultural research and interventions should be explicitly culture-centred and that it is possible to eventually generate cross-cultural knowledge (Berry et al., 2011). This implies that, by linking research like this to research conducted in culturally diverse contexts, evidence may accumulate and generate cross-cutting principles that may engender a better understanding of general underlying principles (Blattman & Annan, 2010; Stark, Boothby, & Ager, 2008).

9.6.3 Research in cultural diverse setting and the position of the researcher

Research in culturally diverse settings and the position of the researcher in cross-cultural research involve both strengths and possible limitations, some of which are discussed here separately because of the close intertwining of its benefits and possible caveats.

To begin with, the outsider position of the researcher has proved to involve considerable constraints, yet on the other hand also obvious benefits. Limitations related to the outside position included possible barriers to access research sites and participants, possible biases in participants' responses and stories that were constructed for a foreign audience, language barriers in communicating to many of the participants, and dependency on 'gatekeepers' to access information ordinarily unavailable to outsiders. This implied that in order to gain access to and an understanding of the data, the researcher relied heavily on local partners (Mullings, 1999). Besides, several encounters were organized between the researcher and the participants before collecting the data, in order to establish a certain level of trust and facilitate reliability of the data (Mullings, 1999). On the other hand, the researcher's position as outsider also markedly stimulated some participants to open up and tell their story that could not be told to insiders because of their veiled child soldier past or sensitivity of the content in the context of the community they lived in.

As a direct result of the diverse cultural settings involved in this research, cultural and linguistic differences also came to the fore. The different cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the researcher and the participants in this dissertation might have produced subtle cultural barriers or language constraints that might have gone unnoticed because they possibly confined the researcher's responsiveness (Barenbaum et al., 2004). Nonetheless, the researcher anticipated on possible limitations due to cultural and linguistic differences by working in close cooperation with local research assistants. Numerous preparatory meetings and debriefings were organized between the researcher and the local research team to reflect on the data collection procedure and results against the backdrop of possible cultural differences. During these meetings, both cultural backgrounds were brought in dialogue in order to search for the lowest common denominators and establish a common ground for the interpretation of the research findings (Yeganeh et al., 2004). This implies that a co-constructed mindset allowed the exchange and negotiation of perspectives and knowledge that helped to better understand the phenomena under study. Besides, the researcher's regular

lengthy periods of residence in the area as well as immersion into the local language might also have enhanced the researcher's cultural sensitivity and responsiveness.

Moreover, the high participation rate of the young people in the studies allowed creating relatively large sample sizes, which can be considered a strong point of this dissertation. However, their participation might have been motivated by the expectation to receive immediate benefits or direct compensation in return for the information they shared, as had often been the case in the past with humanitarian agencies (Netland, 2005). This is a potential pitfall of working with the legacy of years of international humanitarian aid in the area. Since this had become obvious to the researcher before the onset of this research (Coppens, Vindevogel, Derluyn, Loots, & Broekaert, 2012), some anticipatory measures were taken to maximally exclude such motivations for participation. To begin with, the researcher chose to operate independently from any humanitarian agency to avoid unintended associations between the research and the interventions of such agencies. By doing this, primers for possible associative notions of causality between participation in the research and receiving that kind of professional support were minimalized. This also contributed to the maximum reduction of potential biases in the reports of resources and more specifically in evaluating professional support as resourceful. Secondly, the researcher took extensive time to explain her position and the possibilities and limitations of her research to the participants. Great emphasis was placed on the fact that the participants were not going to benefit immediately from their participation, but that their information could make a contribution to the general development of the field, and that this in turn could benefit young people like them. To reinforce this message, no financial or material incentive was provided for participation. However, all this could not guarantee fully that persistent expectations about future support did not motivate their participation in this research.

Another considerable challenge during this dissertation was the continuous exercise to strike a balance between the possibility of creating a medium to bring forward the experiences and perspectives of formerly recruited young people and the limitations of representing their stories and ideas in this research. Driven by the intention to work with the children's perspectives and to represent their voices on the research topic, this research extensively queried the participants' perceptions and elicited their perspectives to get acquainted with the children's lived experiences. The underlying motivation was that joint meaning making and reinterpretation of the narrative of lived experiences has the potential of creating a better understanding of these

experiences (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004; Ricoeur, 1976; Van Manen, 1990). Equally compelling, however, was the awareness of the possibility that this research was unable to fully capture the perspective of the participants and to represent and impart it to others who might not read it the way it was meant (Foucault, 1970). An important impetus for the reinterpretation and retelling of the participants' experiences was undoubtedly the culturally diverse background. The close cooperation with the local research team and regular member checks with the participants helped to insure that the ideas conveyed in this dissertation represented also their ideas about their situation and the joint interpretation that was created. Besides, the inexpressibility of the endured hardship often evoked the impression that the stories could not be told by the participants themselves and certainly not be retold by the researcher, for these were beyond words (Andrews, 2010). Additionally, the rigid format of scientific manuscripts and the neat scientific jargon were sometimes experienced as a cumbersome straightjacket, that forced the researcher to decompose the transition experience into separated, decontextualized units and to translate the emotions into facts and figures.

9.7 Implications for further research

Research always aims to generate systematic, reliable and transferrable knowledge of the phenomena under study and can be perceived as a set of axioms with regard to 'knowing'. In doing so, it makes use of theoretical, epistemological frameworks to describe the nature of reality, to explain the inherent connections between observations and to determine what is perceived as valuable knowledge (Broekaert, 2009; Maddill & Gough, 2008; Oancea & Pring, 2008). Theories often make use of paradigmatic models, which are the derived perspectives from which the simplified conception of the reality is described, explained or understood in scientific research (Broekaert, 2009a; Derksen, 1985; Kicken, 1975). However, the complexity of reality and its subjection to the historical socio-cultural context reveal that it is a fallacy that science can generate the only and entire truth about the studied phenomena and that it is directly deducible for changing practice (Skrtic, 1991). This has led to views that a study is already outdated at the moment it is published (Pretorius, 1976). For this reason, scientific knowledge should continuously be subjected to revision in the light of new corroborating or divergent findings that are grounded in empiricism and rationalism. The implications for further research therefore imply the fundamental expansion or deepening of the scientific knowledge and the further development of its practical purpose and implications.

9.7.1 Longitudinal research design

Future research could make a great advancement by using a longitudinal research design to study former child soldiers' transition trajectories and the challenges and resources that shape these trajectories. Given that transition is conceptualized as a chain of consecutive events that may cover multiple years (Felner et al., 1983; Hobfoll, 1989; Petriwskyj, Thorpe, & Tayler, 2005; Wilcox, 1986), this longer term perspective is ideally also reflected in the research designs and methodologies by which it is studied (Rindfleisch et al., 2008). Interesting research questions to address in longitudinal research include the evolution of former child soldiers' transition over time, the role of challenges and resources as determinants of the direction and course of the transition, the influence of evolutions in encountered challenges and in resource reservoirs on the experience of distress or resilience, among other pathways to further explore. To maximize the validity of the research design, it requires the combination of a strong theory, careful longitudinal design, and appropriate analytic tools (Rindfleisch et al., 2008).

9.7.2 Mediation/moderation analysis of resources in the relationship between challenges and resilience

While there is sound evidence for the 'dose-effect' relationship between adversity-related factors and psychosocial well-being (Barenbaum et al., 2004; Bayer, Klasen, & Adam, 2007; Boothby, 2006; Mollica, McInnes, Pham, Smith Fawzi, Murphy, & Lin, 1998), this dissertation revealed that psychosocial well-being is also associated with post-adversity factors. There is broader support for the idea that such factors may mediate or moderate the impact of adversity on psychosocial well-being (Miller & Rasco, 2004; Miller & Rasmussen, 2010). The findings of this research make a compelling case for the consideration of challenges and resources as moderators or mediators of former child soldiers' longer term psychosocial well-being, and thus for their inclusion in models purporting to explain transition patterns of formerly recruited and other people in situations of (post-)armed conflict (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010). The increasing sophistication of statistical methods gradually enhances the possibilities of testing the effects of these factors in quantitative studies (Tol et al., 2009), additionally to the qualitative research presented in this dissertation.

9.7.3 Community–level research

As a consequence of the observation that the impact of armed conflict and child soldiering is largely communal, studies that aim to grasp its full impact should conduct a social ecological analysis that searches for multiple perspectives on the shared experiences. However, very few studies hitherto have transcended the level of the individual as the unit of analysis (Miller & Rasco, 2004). As a consequence, there is a need for studies that incorporate the community and even wider social ecological levels as unit of analysis and examine the challenges and resources from these multiple levels. This implies the exploration and integration of multiple perspectives of involved stakeholders, which, when brought in dialectic integration, bring the knowledge on a higher quality level.

9.7.4 Strengthening the evidence base

Review of the academic literature on psychosocial support for former child soldiers has indicated that only few studies have incorporated evaluations of psychosocial supports (Tol & van Ommeren, 2012). There is hitherto little evidence on the relative effectiveness of interventions, which prevents policy makers and service providers to make evidence-based decisions on intervention strategies (Psychosocial Working Group, 2002; Tol & van Ommeren, 2012). Nonetheless, there is a need to monitor and evaluate policy and practice interventions to generate evidence on which interventions have worked and which interventions can be improved. It is equally important to keep track of the unintended consequences of interventions and to insure that these do not cause harm. Future research should thus be dedicated to the development of evidence-based practice, since this is not only a huge scientific gap but equally an ethical imperative (Wessells, 2008). Crucial herein is that practice, research and policy initiatives become structurally intertwined, joining forces to reciprocally influence and strengthen their interventions (Miller, Kulkarni, & Kushner, 2006). The dialectic integration of theory and practice may not only enhance the reliability and validity of the findings, but also transform both research and practice initiatives. In this regard, future research could make a contribution by examining whether the research findings brought forth in this dissertation also apply to other groups of people or different (post-) conflict settings.

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Nederlandse samenvatting

Hedendaagse gewapende conflicten worden steeds meer uitgevochten binnen de grenzen van één land, waarbij burgers om politieke, sociaal-psychologische en operationele doeleinden in toenemende mate doelwit en slachtoffer worden van oorlogsstrategieën. Een dergelijke oorlogsstrategie is het rekruteren van kinderen en het actief inzetten van deze kindsoldaten in de oorlogsvoering. Wereldwijd zijn momenteel naar schatting een kwart miljoen kindsoldaten betrokken bij gewapende conflicten. Een dergelijk gewapend conflict, waarin de afgelopen decennia naar schatting tien duizenden kindsoldaten betrokken waren, speelt zich af in de noordelijke regio van Oeganda. In dit conflict wordt een cruciale rol vervuld door het Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), een verzetsleger dat hoofdzakelijk bestaat uit kinderen die gedwongen gerekruteerd werden door ontvoering tijdens gewelddadige aanvallen op hun dorpen, scholen en vluchtelingenkampen.

De vaak stressvolle oorlogservaringen en levensomstandigheden die daarmee gepaard gaan (o.a. het dragen van zware vrachten over lange afstanden, het dagenlang ontzegd worden van voeding, het zien doden en gedwongen worden te doden) kunnen diepgaande en langdurige gevolgen hebben voor het psychosociaal welbevinden van voormalige kindsoldaten. Door hun jarenlange afwezigheid in de samenleving en de actieve rol die ze vervulden in het conflict kan hun sociale positie in de samenleving ondermijnd worden. Zodoende vormt de betrokkenheid bij een gewapende groepering een aanzienlijke uitdaging voor het psychosociaal welzijn van voormalige kindsoldaten. Ondanks het feit dat oorlog en meer specifiek de gruwelijke ervaringen als kindsoldaat een aanzienlijke impact kunnen hebben op het welzijn en de ontwikkeling van de betrokken kinderen, blijken niet alle voormalige kindsoldaten langdurige negatieve gevolgen te ondervinden van hun ervaringen. Recente studies wijzen er immers op dat heel wat van hen er in slagen een verbazingwekkende veerkracht aan de dag te leggen en het dus beter doen dan men zou verwachten gezien de ongunstige levensomstandigheden en extreme ervaringen.

Tot op heden blijft de wetenschappelijke kennis over dergelijke veerkrachtige transitie van voormalige kindsoldaten echter beperkt. Dit is hoofdzakelijk het gevolg van de historische dominantie van een biomedische benadering van traumatologie. Dergelijke benadering wordt gekenmerkt door een overmatige focus op specifieke, Westers gedefinieerde individuele psychologische problemen die voormalige kindsoldaten vertonen, wat niet zelden aanleiding gaf tot de beeldvorming van een 'verloren generatie'. Hierdoor ontbreekt het aan een systematische inschatting van de vele uitdagingen en noden die deze jongeren ervaren, alsook aan studies naar de hulpbronnen en sterktes die bijdragen tot veerkrachtige responsen. Bijgevolg wordt het onderzoeksdomein

gekenmerkt door een beperkte conceptualisering van de transitieprocessen van kindsoldaten.

Recente wetenschapstheoretische stromingen en empirische onderzoeksbevindingen wijzen in toenemende mate op deze tekortkomingen van biomedische benaderingen. Dergelijke enge benaderingen van trauma reduceren immers de complexiteit van de uitdagingen waarmee voormalige kindsoldaten worden geconfronteerd, wat noopt tot een bredere inschatting van mogelijke psychosociale consequenties. Bovendien miskent de focus op individuele problemen de sterke intersectie met collectieve belevenissen en reacties in oorlogssituaties, wat pleit voor een meer gecontextualiseerde benadering van de psychosociale impact van oorlog. De eenzijdige aandacht voor de problemen die de oorlog kan teweeg brengen impliceert daarenboven een onderschatting van de inspanningen die mensen ondernemen en de hulpbronnen die zij daarbij aanwenden. Dit vraagt om meer aandacht voor sterktes en hulpbronnen in onderzoek. Ten slotte wordt de culturele validiteit van de Westerse epidemiologie en nosologie sterk in twijfel getrokken, in een pleidooi voor een cultuursensitieve benadering van psychosociaal welzijn.

Rekening houdend met deze recente paradigmaverschuiving, bestudeert het voorliggend doctoraatsonderzoek hoe voormalige kindsoldaten hun transitieproces van het militaire naar het civiele leven ervaren en welke uitdagingen en hulpbronnen zij daarbij ondervinden. De centrale doelstelling is het genereren van meer inzichten in wat voormalige kindsoldaten helpt in het omgaan met hun voorbije oorlogservaringen en huidige uitdagingen die zij ervaren tijdens hun transitieproces. Het onderzoek wordt vormgegeven vanuit een conceptuele integratie van de sociaal ecologische systeemtheorie (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) en de hulpbronnentheorie (Hobfoll, 2002). Deze theoretische kaders benadrukken dat individueel welzijn sterk beïnvloed wordt door enerzijds verschillende sociale lagen van de ruimere context, en anderzijds door de dynamische wisselwerking tussen de uitdagingen en hulpbronnen die grotendeels door deze context worden voortgebracht. Zodoende komt dit onderzoek in zekere mate tegemoet aan de bovengeschetste hiaten in de huidige wetenschappelijke kennis.

Het onderzoek wordt uitgevoerd met voormalige kindsoldaten in de noordelijke Oegandese provincie Lira. Om de onderzoeksvraag op een zo integraal mogelijke manier te benaderen, combineert de studie zowel kwalitatieve als kwantitatieve onderzoeksmethoden. Hierin staat het perspectief van de voormalige kindsoldaten zelf centraal, waarbij verkend

wordt hoe zij hun transitieproces hebben ervaren, wat zij als de belangrijkste uitdagingen hebben gepercipieerd en welke hulpbronnen zij in dit proces hebben benut. In belangrijke mate wordt hierbij aandacht besteed aan de vergelijking van zowel uitdagingen als hulpbronnen tussen gerekruteerde en niet-gerekruteerde Noord-Oegandese jongeren, iets wat tot op heden zelden bestudeerd werd. Om tegemoet te komen aan de vooropgestelde onderzoeksvragen en doelstellingen, wordt dit onderzoek opgesplitst in vier deelstudies.

De ***eerste studie*** heeft tot doel inzicht te verwerven in het profiel van voormalige kindsoldaten in het noorden van Oeganda, gezien de betreffende literatuur aangeeft dat het begrip 'kindsoldaat' een grote diversiteit omvat en bovendien contextueel bepaald wordt (hoofdstuk 2). De studie behelst dan ook het documenteren van de omvang en aard van oorlogsgerelateerde ervaringen van voormalige kindsoldaten gedurende hun tijd bij het rebellenleger in het noorden van Oeganda. Daarbij wordt aandacht besteed aan de prevalentie van dergelijke ervaringen, alsook aan factoren die geassocieerd worden met een differentiële blootstelling aan deze ervaringen. Hiertoe wordt samenwerking aangegaan met vier opvangcentra in Noord-Oeganda, wat toelaat hun archieven met intakegegevens van 8 790 voormalige kindsoldaten te bestuderen. Omwille van de consistentie en uitvoerigheid ervan, wordt de databank van het Rachele Rehabilitation Centre uitvoeriger bestudeerd. Het Rachele Rehabilitation Centre is een gewezen opvangcentrum voor voormalige kindsoldaten in Lira, Noord-Oeganda. Deze databank bevat gegevens over de socio-demografische achtergrond, de ontvoering, de ervaringen bij het LRA en de terugkeer van 1 995 voormalige kindsoldaten. Descriptieve en vergelijkende statistische analyses worden uitgevoerd om de omvang en aard van de ervaringen van de betrokken kinderen te bestuderen, waarna ANCOVA analyses worden uitgevoerd om na te gaan welke variabelen geassocieerd zijn met een hoger aantal oorlogsgerelateerde ervaringen van kindsoldaten. De resultaten onthullen de uitgestrektheid en de gruwelijke aard van het misbruik dat kindsoldaten ondergaan in het LRA. Geen van hen werd gevrijwaard van de terreur die het LRA op grote schaal zaaide. Deze kinderen leefden in uiterst precaire omstandigheden en werden regelmatig blootgesteld aan gruweldaden, waarvan ze zelf slachtoffer, maar ook getuige en zelfs dader werden. De resultaten wijzen bovendien op aanzienlijke diversiteit in de ervaringen en in de rollen die voormalige kindsoldaten vervullen binnen het LRA. Kinderen die langer bij het LRA verblijven, die een militaire opleiding ondergaan, die gevestigd zijn in een Soedanese LRA-basis, ouder zijn en als vrouw worden toegekend aan één van de rebellen lopen meer risico op een

verhoogde blootstelling aan dergelijke ervaringen van misbruik. Dit alles wijst erop dat de term 'kindsoldaten' een zeer heterogene groep omvat.

Hoewel algemeen verondersteld wordt dat dergelijke ervaringen een bedreiging vormen voor het psychosociaal welzijn van voormalige kindsoldaten, wordt dit psychosociaal welzijn zelden op langere termijn in kaart gebracht. Daarom beoogt de ***tweede studie*** een profiel te creëren van het psychosociaal welzijn van Noord-Oegandese voormalige kindsoldaten op langere termijn en te exploreren welke factoren hiermee geassocieerd zijn (hoofdstuk 3). Specifieke aandacht gaat hierbij uit naar enerzijds de rol van de ervaringen als kindsoldaat in het LRA en anderzijds de ervaringen in de samenleving na terugkomst uit het LRA. Hiertoe werd samenwerking aangegaan met het Rachele Rehabilitation Centre in Lira, dat een databank ter beschikking stelde van 424 voormalige kindsoldaten die werden opgevolgd nadat ze gemiddeld twee jaar eerder het centrum verlieten. Deze databank bestond hoofdzakelijk uit socio-demografische gegevens, psychologische symptomen die op verschillende momenten werden gemeten, gegevens over de tijd bij het LRA en informatie over de huidige levenscondities in de samenleving. Beschrijvende statistische analyses werden uitgevoerd om de psychologische symptomen op langere termijn te documenteren en evoluties in deze symptomen doorheen de tijd na te gaan. Deze resultaten tonen aan dat de psychologische symptomen een uiteenlopend verloop kennen doorheen de tijd, waarbij sommige symptomen afnemen of stabiliseren, terwijl andere symptomen op langere termijn toenemen. Gezien deze uiteenlopende ontwikkelingen, rijst de vraag met welke factoren deze ontwikkelingen samenhangen. Hiervoor worden binaire logistische regressies uitgevoerd om te onderzoeken of deze psychologische symptomen op langere termijn geassocieerd zijn met ervaringen als kindsoldaat en/of ervaringen in de samenleving na terugkomst. De resultaten van deze studie tonen aan dat ervaringen in de samenleving na terugkomst, zoals de economische situatie van het gezin, het al dan niet genieten van onderwijs, het ontvangen van professionele steun en in het bijzonder het ervaren van stigmatisering, bepalender zijn voor psychologische symptomen dan de ervaringen als kindsoldaat. Dit impliceert niet dat de ervaringen als kindsoldaat geen invloed uitoefenen op het psychosociaal welzijn van voormalige kindsoldaten, maar dat na verloop van tijd de ervaringen in de samenleving relatief belangrijker worden voor hun welzijn en psychologische stress kunnen veroorzaken of verergeren. Dit leidt tot de bevinding dat het psychosociaal welzijn van voormalige kindsoldaten op langere termijn wellicht meer afhankelijk is van de uitdagingen waar zij tijdens hun transitie voorstaan dan van de ervaringen die ze als kindsoldaat hebben.

De voorgaande studie documenteert vermoedelijk slechts enkele van de uiteenlopende uitdagingen waarmee voormalige kindsoldaten worden geconfronteerd. Bovendien heeft dit onderzoek ook tot doel om de hulpbronnen van voormalige kindsoldaten in kaart te brengen. Om deze redenen beoogt de ***derde studie*** te inventariseren wat Noord-Oegandese voormalige kindsoldaten zelf ervaren als uitdagingen en hulpbronnen in hun transitieproces van de oorlogsvoerende rebellenbeweging naar de door oorlog getroffen samenleving. Bovendien betracht deze studie na te gaan of informele en formele steunnetwerken, zoals familieleden, vrienden, de gemeenschap, professionele organisaties en de overheid, een rol vervullen in het transitieproces van voormalige kindsoldaten en hoe deze informele en formele steunnetwerken zich hierin tot elkaar verhouden. Omdat het belangrijk wordt geacht dit op een omvattende manier in kaart te brengen, waarbij de culturele context en het perspectief van de jongeren in acht worden genomen, worden Noord-Oegandese jongeren (zowel voormalige gerekruteerde als niet-gerekruteerde jongeren) bevraagd over wat voor hen de meest pertinente uitdagingen en hulpbronnen zijn, alsook wat hun perspectieven zijn op ondersteuning van voormalige kindsoldaten. De participanten van deze studie zijn 1 008 jongeren die geselecteerd werden via gestratificeerde randomisatie in scholen en dorpen in diverse geografische gebieden in Lira, waarvan 330 participanten voorheen gerekruteerd werden door het LRA. Door zowel voormalig gerekruteerde als niet-gerekruteerde jongeren te bevragen, kan deze studie eveneens een vergelijking maken van de uitdagingen, hulpbronnen en perspectieven op ondersteuning tussen gerekruteerde en niet-gerekruteerde jongeren.

De uitdagingen die worden gerapporteerd, worden vervolgens door 50 Noord-Oegandese volwassenen gecategoriseerd op basis van hun overeenkomst. Dit resultaat wordt aan kwalitatieve en kwantitatieve cluster-analyses onderworpen met het oog op het creëren van betekenisvolle en robuuste clusters. De resultaten indiceren een waaier aan uitdagingen die zich bevinden op zowel individueel niveau als op meerdere lagen van hun sociale omgeving. Bovendien representeren de gerapporteerde uitdagingen een mix van rechtstreekse gevolgen van oorlogsvoering, aangetaste omgevingsfactoren met nefaste invloed op de ontwikkeling van de jongeren en meer structurele kenmerken van de omgeving die het dagelijks leven bemoeilijken in de nasleep van de oorlog. De gerapporteerde uitdagingen vertonen veel overeenkomsten tussen gerekruteerde en niet-gerekruteerde jongeren, met uitzondering van enkele opmerkelijke verschillen. Emotionele uitdagingen worden het meest en aanzienlijk meer gerapporteerd door voormalige kindsoldaten, wat aangeeft dat emotionele stress voor hen een voorname bezorgdheid vormt.

Anderzijds worden relationele en sociale uitdagingen meer pertinent bevonden door niet-gerekruteerde jongeren, met uitzondering van stigmatisering, wat een wezenlijke bezorgdheid vormt voor voormalige kindsoldaten. Overigens wijzen de gerapporteerde uitdagingen erop dat de bezorgdheden van voormalige kindsoldaten verder reiken dan de onmiddellijke gevolgen van hun tijd bij het LRA, maar grotendeels betrekking hebben op uitdagingen die deel uitmaken van het dagelijkse en gemeenschappelijke leven in de maatschappij, zoals het gebrek aan onderwijs en vaardigheden, de economische situatie, culturele en maatschappelijke praktijken die nefast worden bevonden. Het vierde hoofdstuk van dit proefschrift rapporteert deze studie.

De hulpbronnen die in deze studie worden gerapporteerd, worden thematisch geanalyseerd en gecategoriseerd op basis van het conceptueel kader voor psychosociale hulpbronnen ontwikkeld door de Psychosocial Working Group (2002). Uit deze studie blijkt dat voormalige kindsoldaten hoofdzakelijk religie, sociale steun en individuele coping mechanismen rapporteren, hulpbronnen die in dit conceptueel kader respectievelijk gesitueerd worden in de domeinen cultureel kapitaal, sociaal kapitaal en menselijk kapitaal. De talrijk gerapporteerde hulpbronnen bevestigen de hypothese dat individuen en hun sociaal-culturele omgeving rijk zijn aan hulpbronnen. Bovendien zijn er over het algemeen weinig verschillen tussen voormalig gerekruteerde en niet-gerekruteerde jongeren, wat wijst op het vergelijkbaar gebruik en toegankelijkheid van de hulpbronnen. Deze studie wijst bijgevolg op de rijkdom aan en diversiteit van de hulpbronnen die voorhanden zijn voor jongeren in het noorden van Oeganda, wat op zich een interessante vaststelling is gezien deze context vaak beschouwd wordt als een verarmde context door de vernietigende oorlogsvoering. Bovendien onthullen de resultaten de dynamische uitwisseling van hulpbronnen over verschillende sociale lagen van de samenleving, dit in functie van het individueel en gemeenschappelijk welzijn. Dit verwijst naar de belangrijke intersecties tussen individuele en collectieve processen in het omgaan met uitdagingen. Al deze bevindingen ondersteunen de conceptualisering van veerkracht als een proces dat vorm krijgt voorbij het individuele niveau, door een interactie van het individu met de hulpbronnen en ondersteuningsprocessen in de ruimere sociaal ecologische context. Deze studie wordt gerapporteerd in het vijfde hoofdstuk van dit proefschrift.

De aanwezigheid van hulpbronnen in deze context blijkt echter niet te impliceren dat er geen nood is aan ondersteuning van deze hulpbronnen door diverse informele en formele steunnetwerken. De aanbevelingen van voormalige kindsoldaten en hun niet-gerekruteerde leeftijdsgenoten worden gecategoriseerd naargelang de actoren en de hulpbrondomeinen

van het conceptueel kader van de Psychosocial Working Group (2002). De resultaten van deze analyse tonen aan dat voormalige kindsoldaten ondersteuning wensen voor een breed scala aan hulpbronnen, voornamelijk van hun kennis en vaardigheden, hun bestaansmiddelen, en psychische gezondheid. Interpretatie van deze voornaamste hulpbronnen waarvoor men ondersteuning wenst in het licht van de voornaamste uitdagingen die voormalige kindsoldaten rapporteren (hoofdstuk 4), toont duidelijke parallellen met de gerapporteerde educatieve, economische, en emotionele uitdagingen. Dit kan erop wijzen dat in deze levensdomeinen de beschikbare hulpbronnen overtroffen worden door de ervaren uitdagingen. Verdere nood aan ondersteuning heeft betrekking op de wederopbouw van het sociale weefsel en de ontwikkeling van sociale capaciteiten, alsook op het mensenrechten kader en het culturele waardenkader van waaruit uitdagingen kunnen worden aangepakt. De bevinding dat deze jongeren, ondanks de rijkelijk aanwezige hulpbronnen die ze rapporteerden (hoofdstuk 5), bijkomende ondersteuning wensen van deze hulpbronnen door informele en formele steunnetwerken, kan wijzen op de nood aan voortdurende aanvulling en versterking van deze hulpbronnen om hun continuïteit en toekomstige beschikbaarheid te verzekeren. De vergelijking van de perspectieven van voormalig gerekruteerde en niet-gerekruteerde jongeren toont aan dat de ideeën van voormalige kindsoldaten grotendeels onderschreven worden door hun niet-gerekruteerde leeftijdsgenoten, wat mogelijk aangeeft dat deze bereid zijn hun eigen en andere gemeenschappelijke hulpbronnen te investeren in het welzijn van voormalige kindsoldaten. Bovendien zijn zij van mening dat informele en formele steunnetwerken grotendeels dezelfde hulpbronnen dienen aan te bieden. Deze studie wordt gerapporteerd in het achtste hoofdstuk van dit proefschrift.

Naast het in kaart brengen van de hulpbronnen van voormalige kindsoldaten, beoogt dit onderzoek ook te begrijpen welke betekenis deze hulpbronnen hebben in het ruimere transitieproces. De ***vierde studie*** heeft bijgevolg tot doel de betekenis van deze hulpbronnen bloot te leggen, om op die manier te achterhalen waarom de ervaren hulpbronnen als waardevol beschouwd worden en welke rol deze vervullen in het transitieproces van voormalige kindsoldaten. Daartoe worden 48 jongeren, die aangeven voorheen gerekruteerd te zijn geweest door het LRA en bereid te zijn tot verdere toelichting, geselecteerd uit de groep jongeren die deelnamen aan de derde studie. Van hen wordt individueel een diepte-interview afgenomen, met aspecten van de Life-line Interview Method (LIM) en Retrospective Interview Technique (RIT). Doel van dit interview is het retrospectief bevragen van het transitieproces, waarbij de participanten

uitgenodigd worden om hun verhaal te vertellen en verzocht worden om op een tijdslijn te identificeren welke uitdagingen en hulpbronnen zij daarbij hebben ervaren (LIM) en voor verschillende tijdstippen een score toe te kennen aan hun geluk (RIT).

Om tegemoet te komen aan de eerste doelstelling – het achterhalen van de betekenis van hulpbronnen in het transitieproces – worden de interviews geanalyseerd aan de hand van de fenomenologische hermeneutische methode. De resultaten van deze kwalitatieve analyse in combinatie met ontwikkelingspsychologische en antropologische theorieën over transitie wijzen op de viervoudige betekenis van hulpbronnen. In de eerste plaats helpen hulpbronnen om te breken met het verleden bij het LRA en om zowel fysiek als symbolisch los te komen van het kindsoldaat zijn. Ten tweede faciliteren hulpbronnen de mogelijkheid om stand te houden bij confrontatie met existentiële uitdagingen na het verlaten van de gewapende groepering. Ten derde worden hulpbronnen gewaardeerd omdat ze bijdragen tot wederzijdse aanpassing van voormalige kindsoldaten en actoren in hun omgeving, en zodoende een gevoel van verbondenheid met anderen en met de omgeving in de hand werken. Ten slotte laten hulpbronnen de voormalige kindsoldaten toe om zelf-geactualiseerde en volwaardige leden van de samenleving te worden, met een duidelijke oriëntatie naar de toekomst. Dit alles toont aan dat hulpbronnen een belangrijke rol vervullen in de ontwikkeling van een gevoel van identiteit en verbondenheid na het verlaten van de gewapende groepering en dat de centrale waarde van hulpbronnen dus gesitueerd kan worden in de bevordering van een zinvolle maatschappelijke identiteit en rol. De studie onthult op die manier ook de waardevolle doeleinden die de voormalige kindsoldaten nastreven en toont aan dat contextuele ondersteuning van deze doelen kan bijdragen tot veerkrachtige transitieprocessen. Deze studie wordt gerapporteerd in het zesde hoofdstuk van dit proefschrift.

In functie van de tweede doelstelling van deze studie, namelijk het creëren van een beter begrip van de rol van hulpbronnen in het transitieproces, worden eerst de RIT-resultaten van alle participanten geanalyseerd om het trajectverloop van het transitieproces te reconstrueren. Deze analyse wijst op vier trajecttypes, die in de bredere literatuur geconceptualiseerd worden als ‘snel herstel’, ‘gestaag herstel’, ‘uiteindelijk verval’ en ‘persistente stress’. Dit wijst op de heterogeniteit en complexiteit van de transitietrajecten, en illustreert dat voormalige kindsoldaten een relatief veerkrachtige transitie rapporteren maar dat dit lang niet voor iedereen het geval is. Vervolgens wordt voor elk traject een casus geselecteerd, die op basis van de LIM-resultaten diepgaander wordt geanalyseerd volgens de interpretatieve fenomenologische methode. Deze resultaten onthullen allerhande

uitdagingen, zowel gerelateerd aan de ervaringen bij de rebellen en aan de ervaringen terug in de samenleving. Vooral situaties van aanhoudende uitputting van hulpbronnen, verlies van niet te compenseren hulpbronnen, en dreiging van de schaarse resterende hulpbronnen lijkt de voorraad aan hulpbronnen aanzienlijk te boven te gaan, wat maakt dat amper het hoofd kan worden geboden aan de ervaren uitdagingen. Dit lukt wel wanneer voormalige kindsoldaten erin slagen een halt toe te roepen aan het verlies van hulpbronnen, beschikbare hulpbronnen te benutten en de resterende hulpbronnen te waarderen. Dit alles illustreert de dynamische interactie tussen uitdagingen en hulpbronnen in het transitieproces en indiceert het belang van de fit tussen deze factoren. Deze studie wordt gerapporteerd in het zevende hoofdstuk van dit proefschrift.

Uit dit proefschrift blijkt dat het concept 'voormalige kindsoldaten' een heterogene groep met diverse ervaringen, noden en sterktes omvat, en dat het concept 'transitie' complexe en heterogene trajecten naar een getransformeerde situatie behelst. Bovendien wijst dit proefschrift erop dat de transitie van voormalige kindsoldaten van het militaire naar het civiele leven opgevat moet worden als een transformatief proces, dat meer omvat dan een eenzijdige of een enkel moment van inspanning en zich uiteindelijk ontvouwt tot een situatie die fundamenteel verschillend is van de situatie voor de episode als kindsoldaat. De uitdagingen en hulpbronnen die in dit proces ervaren worden zijn afkomstig van verschillende sociale lagen die voormalige kindsoldaten omringen en zijn dus in grote mate inherent aan het gemeenschappelijke, sociale weefsel van de samenleving. Daarnaast kan worden geconcludeerd dat het vertrekpunt niet de geïsoleerde uitdagingen en hulpbronnen dienen te zijn, dan wel een holistische benadering van de individuele variaties in de transitieprocessen van voormalige kindsoldaten, van waaruit de dynamische wisselwerking tussen uitdagingen en hulpbronnen in beschouwing wordt genomen. Vervolgens illustreert dit proefschrift ook dat de conceptualisering van veerkracht dient te worden uitgebreid tot ver voorbij het individuele niveau, en noodzakelijk ook hulpbronnen en ondersteuningsprocessen vanuit de ruimere sociale ecologie in acht dient te nemen. Hiermee vormt dit proefschrift een conceptuele integratie van de sociale ecologische systeemtheorie en de hulpbronnentheorie, wat een nuttige lens blijkt te zijn waardoor de transitie van voormalige kindsoldaten kan worden begrepen. Gezien de complementariteit van de bevindingen die gegenereerd werden door grootschalige kwantitatieve studies en diepgaande kwalitatieve studies, illustreert dit proefschrift ook het belang van de combinatie van methoden voor het bestuderen van de complexiteit van de transitieprocessen, waarbij de integratie van complementaire nomothetische en ideografische

perspectieven de theoretische kennis naar een hoger niveau kan tillen. Dit alles impliceert de ontoereikendheid van een enkelvoudig normatief kader of unieke formule voor het benaderen van voormalige kindsoldaten in transitie. Deze algemene conclusies worden uiteengezet in het negende hoofdstuk van dit proefschrift.

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Epilogue

It happened more often than not, after telling people passionately about this research, that the first question to follow was whether this wasn't an extremely difficult research topic for a young woman. The second question was most likely whether there was still hope for those formerly recruited young people. I won't attempt a complete answer here, but I take the liberty to share some reflections on these questions.
As for the first question, I must admit that it has not always been easy. First and foremost, the confrontation with the true horrors of war shook my world and moved me deeply, but that is the stuff for a different type of account of this journey. An equally challenging observation, however, was the confrontation with the boundaries of my position as a researcher. More specifically, it has been a challenge to work as a *muno*[10] researcher with the legacy of a destructive armed conflict and the influx of international humanitarian agencies expected to make up the enormous losses with means that were all too scarce. As a result, a white person in northern Uganda became indissolubly associated with the amplified probability that support would follow. Time and again, the sharp confrontation between these young people's expectations about support and my own limitations as a researcher to provide the much-needed support left both parties disappointed. In most cases, after extensive dialogue, both of us found some satisfaction in the idea that I would utilize the medium of this dissertation to forward their message and advocate for unremitting support for people living with the aftermath of armed conflict. As one of them phrased it: '*push our voices up, I hope that something fruitful will come out of this'.* I too truly hope, together with the hundreds of formerly recruited young people I was honoured to meet, that this dissertation can serve this noble cause and activate those people who are in the position of actually providing support, in any capacity.

In planning to provide support, be it from the position of policy-making bodies, non-governmental organizations or individual charity donors, it is my hope that the reflections on that second question are equally taken into account. The origin of that question with its inherent prejudices is likely to be found in mainstream media portrayals and popular views on child

[10] White person

soldiers. I hope that at this point, this dissertation has already rendered this question redundant, but those still left in doubt I can assure that the formerly recruited young people I encountered and shared with did not fit the image of former child soldiers as reckless and bloodthirsty youngsters who are irreparably damaged and continue to form a threat to society. I experienced many of the formerly recruited youngsters I got to know to be courageous and creative young people, who actively fought against the demons of their past and the challenges they were facing in their current life situation, who desperately desired sustainable conflict resolution and peace, who shared the same hopes and dreams as their non-recruited peers, and who were endowed with talents and hope for chances to further develop these talents. What I also perceived, is that much heavily depends on their surroundings, more particularly on the opportunities that they are provided or denied and on the resources that are shared with or withheld from them, on all levels of their environment. It is my view that herein lies the key for making a difference for them. *Use your resources to promote theirs*.